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Sarasa Nagase

ILLUSTRATION BY Mai Murasaki



I'm the
VILLAINESS,
so I'm **Taming**

the **Final
Boss**



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Copyright

I'M THE VILLAINESS, SO I'M TAMING THE FINAL BOSS, Vol. 5
Sarasa Nagase

Translation by Taylor Engel
Cover art by Mai Murasaki

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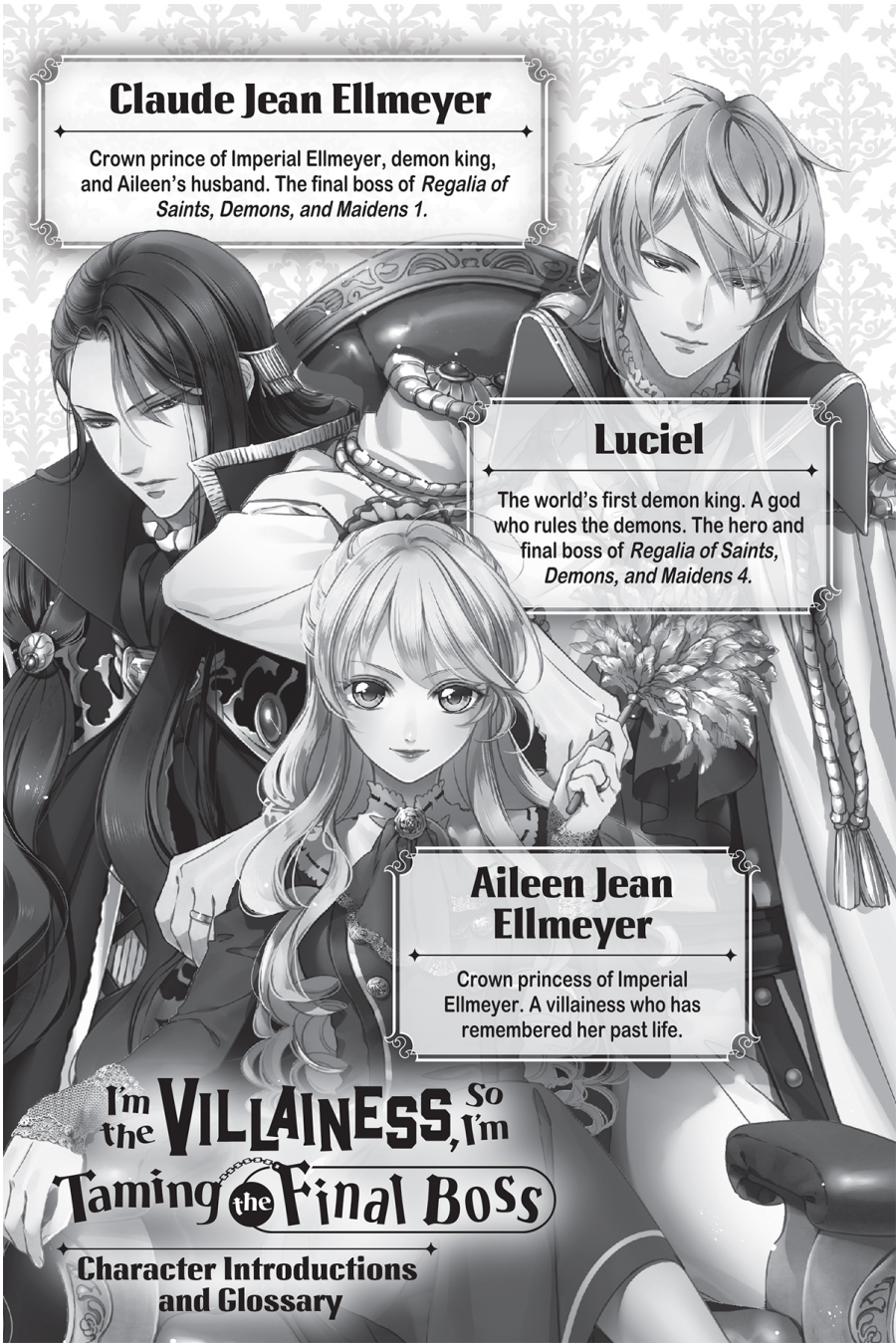
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Claude Jean Ellmeyer

Crown prince of Imperial Ellmeyer, demon king, and Aileen's husband. The final boss of *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 1*.

Luciel

The world's first demon king. A god who rules the demons. The hero and final boss of *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 4*.

Aileen Jean Ellmeyer

Crown princess of Imperial Ellmeyer. A villainess who has remembered her past life.

I'm the **VILLAINESS**, So
Taming the Final Boss

Character Introductions
and Glossary

The Story Thus Far

When Aileen's engagement is broken, memories of her past life surface, and she realizes she's been reincarnated into the world of an *otome* game as its villainess. To escape destruction, she decides to romance Claude, the final boss! After many twists and turns, Aileen becomes Claude's consort, the crown princess. She's currently striving for a happy ending that doesn't exist in the game, conquering all the final bosses that bar her way.

In Volume 1

The *otome* game *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 1*

Set in the Ellmeyer Empire, where the legend of the Maid of the Sacred Sword still lingers. On the main route—Cedric's—Lilia acquires the sacred sword and slays the demon king, saving the world as the Maid's reincarnation.

Hero



**Cedric Jean
Ellmeyer**

At present: The deposed crown prince. Confined.

Heroine



**Lilia
Reinoise**

At present: Cedric's fiancée. Confined.

Final Boss

**Claude Jean
Ellmeyer**

Villainess

**Aileen Lauren
d'Autriche**

In Volume 2

Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 2 ~ *Falling Kingdom and Saint of Salvation*

Set in Misha Academy, in the land where the Maid of the Sacred Sword was born. On the main route—Auguste's—Serena borrows the power of the sacred sword from Lilia. Along with Auguste, who is now the Holy Knight, she drives away the remaining demons and becomes the Maid of Salvation.

Hero



Auguste Zelm

At present: A member of Ellmeyer's Holy Knights.

Heroine



Serena Gilbert

At present: A servant and spy.

Final Boss



James Charles

At present: Aileen and Claude's close attendant.

Villainess



Rachel Danis

At present: Aileen's lady-in-waiting.

In Volume 3

Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 1 ~ *Fan Disc*

Final Boss



A sequel about Lilia, now the Maid of the Sacred Sword. Elefas, a mage descended from a fallen magic nation, covertly attempts to resurrect the demon king and have his revenge. However, Lilia stops him on every route.

Elefas Levi

At present: Aileen and Claude's close attendant, and Claude's body double.

In Volume 4

Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 3 ~ *Cod of the Desert and Blade of Revolution*

Set in the Kingdom of Ashmael, where the legend of the Daughter of God still lingers. On the main route—Ares's—Sahra restores the holy sword and becomes the Daughter of God. Together, she and Ares defeat the holy king, who has been possessed by the fiend dragon. Their revolution succeeds, and she becomes Divine King Ares's wife.

Hero



Ares Emir Ashmael

At present: A rebel who tried to use the fiend dragon. Confined.

Heroine



Sahra

At present: Ares's wife, who failed to become the Daughter of God.

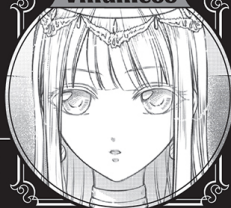
Final Boss



Baal Shah Ashmael

At present: Holy king, and the demon king's friend. In a mutually unrequited love with Roxane.

Villainess



Roxane Fusca

At present: Baal's principal consort, but in a mutually unrequited love with him.

In Volume 5

Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 4 ~ *Sacred Queen and the Maid of Destiny*

Roughly seven hundred years before Game 1, Amelia is chosen as a potential next queen of Hausel. While enduring the machinations of the villainess Grace, Amelia chooses her own destiny, becoming either the queen of Hausel or the Maid of the Sacred Sword. One major difference between this and the previous games is that the final boss is also the main hero. In this world's history, Amelia, the Maid of the Sacred Sword, is considered the founder of Imperial Ellmeyer.

Heroine

Amelia Dark

At present: ???

Hero / Final Boss

Luciel

At present: Claiming to be Claude's father and trying to break up his marriage.

Villainess

Grace Dark

At present: Her link to the royal candidate who shares her name is unclear.

◆ Prelude ◆

The Final Boss Death Flag

I did it for the money.

As excuses went, what he blurted out was far too childish, but he'd already started. It was too late to stop.

He'd wanted money; the only reason he served was because it let him do good business. He'd sold off his demons and turned a fine profit. Fool of a demon king, blind to the fact that a human was tricking him.

Please, please, don't waste any sympathy on me. Become a demon and survive. If you can't find happiness as a human, then at least...

You are the one who saved this life. I'll put it to the best possible use.

Even if I die by your hand, I'm sure that will have been the proper way to use my life.

“

who'd been banished from his house: "I want to come home." "I regret having done something so selfish." "I miss the demons." As a result, he'd expected his master to return ahead of schedule. Kyle, the guard who came in to announce the demon king's return, is also fully prepared, which secretly satisfies Keith.

Walt is waiting for them in the corridor. He's properly dressed as well. Apparently these two have begun to understand how Claude works.

"Elefas is the one who's going out to meet him?"

"That's right. If he borrows Prince Claude's magic, he can teleport all he wants. I'm told Prince Claude plans to make a bold entrance through the front door."

"After we let him play with the demons a little, we'll have to tidy him up and toss him into the imperial castle. The Foundation Festival is approaching rapidly, and work is piling up. Take a message to James, please; we'll need to send a report to the d'Autriche household as well."

Keith heads outside, putting together a schedule in his mind as he goes. The weather's fine today.

The morning sun is dazzling. He suspects it's because finally seeing the demons again has put the demon king in a good mood—But just then, he hears an unfamiliar voice ring out in the main entrance.

"So those are demons! Oh-ho... Yes, this place really is crawling with them."

"Never mind that, just go home already. You're scaring them."

"That isn't our fault: We are the holy king. More importantly, are you seriously telling us to leave right after we so graciously brought you home? At least serve us tea, you ill-mannered lout."

"If you'd taken the barrier down, I could have gone home on my own." Claude is glaring at the other man, not bothering to hide his disgust. Walt and Kyle are understandably stunned. Even Keith's eyes widen in surprise.

The demons are also startled. That's why they're watching from a distance.

"This one must be the mage. Ah, and those aren't normal humans, either. What are they?"

"...My guards and my adviser. Look, enough, just go back to Ashmael."

"If you want to send us home, try teleporting us. Not that you can!"

"Master Claude." When he steels himself and starts forward, Claude whips back, startled. There's something oddly childlike about his expression, and his premonition gradually turns into hope. "And

who might this gentleman be?"

"This guy is—"

"Did you just refer to the king of Ashmael as 'this guy'?"

"It's good enough. You sneaked out of the palace; why get arrogant now?"

"If we hadn't sneaked out, both of us would have been hounded by work, forced to deal with stuffy formal greeting ceremonies and banquets." The magnificent man crosses his arms and fumes at the demon king even as his blond hair catches the sun.

As the holy king, Baal Shah Ashmael possesses power that renders even the demon king's magic ineffective.

I see. Keith wants to burst out laughing, but he controls himself, breathing deeply.

"Besides, you promised to show us around the demon king's castle."

"I don't recall promising that. And now you've seen it, so go home."

"—Listen to me, everyone. First, bring tea and refreshments."

Keith's words make Claude frown.

Pushing his glasses up and suppressing a certain something that's threatening to come out of his eyes, Keith issues orders. "This is Master Claude's friend! A friend I was sure he'd never make! We mustn't let him get away. No careless mistakes! Walt and Kyle, show him to a guest room. Elefas, get the room ready."

"Y-yes, sir! We're on it!"

"Who are you calling my friend?! No, before that, what do you mean you were sure I'd never make one, Keith...?"

"You know it's the truth. Very well. We, your first friend, have stopped by for a visit! Come, come, receive us gratefully!"

"Yes, Your Majesty! This way, please! We'll be your guides!"

"Wait! Why are they treating you like a guest of honor?!"

Claude seems shocked. Hasn't he noticed that he has a habit of addressing people casually when he's acknowledged them as part of his inner circle? Keith flashes a little smile.

"You don't have to waste tea on a guy like him," Claude says, only for Keith to admonish him.

"We couldn't possibly be that rude."

The fine weather makes it obvious that this is all just talk. He can be so stubborn even when he has clearly been outmatched.

Seeing his master acquire another thing he'd once given up on, Keith muses that his unsettling dream must belong to the past.

◆ First Act ◆

The Villainess Treats Fate Abominably

Among other things, the Ellmeyer Empire prides itself on its imperial castle. Its blue spires and clock tower can be seen from anywhere in the capital, and its alabaster walls project beauty and dignity in equal measure.

It's not all beautiful, though. Castles are always home to power struggles. A notable example would be the West Tower, beyond the spacious marble corridors. This tower has long functioned as a genteel prison for the nobility, confining them without truly letting them live or die.

Its current residents are Prince Cedric Jean Ellmeyer and his fiancée, Lilia Reinoise, the former Maid of the Sacred Sword. Having lost a bid for power, these two aren't allowed to take a single step outside without the permission of the crown prince, Claude Jean Ellmeyer. They exist simply to be used as pawns and conveniently discarded—or so it should have been.

“What exactly is this ‘Stall Application for “Completely Infallible! ★ Lilia’s Sacred Sword Fortunes”’ supposed to be?!”

“Oh, would ‘love fortunes’ have been better?”

“Are you being obtuse on purpose? You know there's no way they'll allow this! Think of your position!”

As Aileen yells, Lilia sulks beyond the iron bars. Aileen takes the utterly ludicrous application that was delivered to Claude's office and throws it back in her face.

Imperial Ellmeyer is currently preparing for its Foundation Festival next month. Typically for a festival, there will be street stalls, and Lilia—of all people—has applied to run one.

“You're sooo mean! I worked reeeeeeally hard on that.”

“I'd love to see the inside of your head if you genuinely thought this application would get approved.”

“Well, it's boring in here. Ashmael was so much fun that the tedium is even more apparent now.”

“Apologize to the citizens who support your lifestyle here.”

While the visitation room is walled off with iron bars, the room is still spacious and luxurious. A velvet carpet runs from corner to corner, and the tables and sofas are the equal of any in the imperial

castle. On top of that, there's a parlor and a private bedchamber for both prisoners, plus a dressing room. Naturally, they're given three meals a day, allowed daily baths, and the cleaning is done for them. If they got hurt or fell ill, no doubt a doctor would tend to them.

It's a prison meant for holding the nobility, and the only thing they lack here is freedom.

Naturally, this lifestyle is supported by the taxpayers' hard-earned money.

"...Well, that's why I thought I'd try to work, at least. I gave that my best!"

"I'll make an astronomical concession and not question your sincerity. That said, this is so ridiculous, it practically made me fling it back in your face. What do you mean, 'fortunes'? How did you intend to earn money?"

"Oh, you know. I'm like you, Lady Aileen. I have memories of my past life. Remember?" Putting a hand beside her lips to screen them from view, Lilia scoots her chair closer to the bars. What does she think she's doing, telling secrets? "And that's why I'm sure my fortunes will be accurate. I'll use my game knowledge."

"But that only extends to events that happened in the game."

"That's fine. As long as I get one thing right, I can just make up the rest and they'll get the impression it was correct!"

"That's fraud!"

"Well, I'm not the queen of Hausel. I can't exactly see the future."

"You did something resembling prophecy for a time! Don't just change your tune like that...! This behavior of yours is why nobody even bothers to point out how ridiculous our conversations are anymore!"

Aileen strikes the iron bars with her fist to drive the point home. Lilia just gives her a blank look in return. Then she waves to the women standing behind Aileen—Rachel, her lady-in-waiting, and Serena, her guard. "We certainly had fun the other day, didn't we? Have you two been well? Goodness, the villainess and heroine of the second game, standing side by side! That never even happened on the packaging. So cool."

"As I keep telling you, refrain from comments like that!"

This world is identical to the world of *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens*, a game Aileen and Lilia played in their previous lives. Owing to the shock of her broken engagement, Aileen realized that she was reborn as the villainess, a character who was casually killed off in the game, and used her knowledge of the game to change her fate. In addition, to avert disasters that threaten her husband—the demon king and former final boss—she's turned the final bosses of the sequels into her subordinates or supported their romantic endeavors.

The girl Aileen's verbally fencing with is the heroine of *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 1*, the one who should have been the Maid of the Sacred Sword. "Should have been" because Aileen stole her sword, then destroyed a second one the girl had managed to get her hands on.

The pair standing behind Aileen, letting this bizarre conversation go in one ear and out the other, are the villainess and heroine of the sequel game. Through some twist of fate, they are currently Aileen's lady-in-waiting and a guard disguised as a simple servant.

Serena snorts; she's helping herself to the visitation room sweets. "It's pretty late to be pointing out that you're both out of your minds. I'm not doing it."

"Lady Serena, don't be rude. Lady Aileen is—"

"Rachel, I suspect that whatever you're about to say won't help matters, so don't. Listen, Lilia. Don't be evasive and just answer me: What are you playing at? You must have known this application would be rejected."

Upon returning from the Kingdom of Ashmael, Lilia and Cedric had been promptly sent back to their prison. However, the fact that they were sending applications like this compelled Aileen to personally find out what they were up to.

This woman is her natural enemy. There's no telling what she might do. Circumstance required them to join forces temporarily, but it hasn't changed how she sees Lilia, who styles herself as "the player," declaring that this world is all a game, and the people who live in it are NPCs.

Lilia cocks her head. She's wearing her usual sweet heroine face. "This sort of thing comes up all the time in games, doesn't it? A character reveals the location of the ultimate weapon through an enigmatic hint! I thought that'd be fun to try. First, we'll build a fortune palace at the Foundation Festival next month—"

"I assure you we won't build any such thing. You'll be attending the Foundation Festival ceremony as the fiancée of the second prince."

"I'll do it at the ceremony, then! You can count on me, Lady Aileen. I won't be spoiling you just because you're my favorite character, though. I want you to work hard, as a protagonist should!"

"That's quite enough about favorites and protagonists. The game is over. What could you possibly be planning to do now?"

The recent commotion in Ashmael had been set during the events of *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 3*. As far as Aileen can recall, while the fan discs and ports might have been different, Game 3 was the last one that took place in the present day.

Lilia's eyes widen in a theatrical way, and she grabs the bars. "But what about Game 4?! The one in the Holy Queendom of Hausel!"

“That’s set in the distant past, remember? It’s about the first Maid of the Sacred Sword, in the era before Ellmeyer was founded.”

“Yes, that’s right! Born in Mirchetta, the heroine is abruptly chosen as a candidate for the Queendom of Hausel’s royal exam! In the academic city, where the prospective queens gather, she learns the secret of her own birth and wins the love of the hero!”

“...Come to think of it, that nation doesn’t allow men. What were male students doing there?”

“The academic city where the candidates assemble is treated as a special case! Boys born in the Queendom of Hausel are raised there. Besides, Hausel’s ban on men is lifted in winter, so festival events are held even in the royal capital, where the palace is! Come on, Lady Aileen, you need to remember things like this.”

“Oh, yes, now I remember... No, wait! I’m not falling for that!” Aileen narrowly avoids being swept up in Lilia’s incredibly persistent discussion about lore. “That was the game. This is real life, and you are not the Maid of the Sacred Sword. You’re the fiancée of the second prince, who’s lost a political struggle. There’s a spell on you that will take your head clean off your shoulders if you leave without express permission from Master Claude, and I won’t let you say you’ve forgotten it. Quit going on and on about pointless things and take a good, hard look at reality.”

The spell that was rendered inactive when they were spirited away to the Kingdom of Ashmael has been carefully recast. However, this doesn’t seem to bother Lilia.

“Why, why? Aren’t you curious, Lady Aileen? The newspapers the other day said that the Queendom of Hausel’s royal exam has begun! That’s the one in Game 4!”

Observing Lilia’s excitement coldly, Aileen crosses her arms. “It’s nothing to do with us. That means the game’s plot isn’t relevant, either. End of story.”

“But the current queen’s name is Grace Dark Hausel! The same as the villainess in Game 4!”

“Listen, I know you know better. On the main route—where the heroine Amelia becomes the Maid of the Sacred Sword and founds Imperial Ellmeyer—she refuses to become the queen of Hausel. However, her elder twin sister fell into the hands of the demon king and perished. In a gesture of mourning, she had her sister—the villainess, Grace Dark—immortalized in the Queendom of Hausel as a regnal name. It said as much during the ending. Her Majesty’s name is Grace simply because that’s the custom.”

“Oh, that’s boring. You knew already.”

Aileen doesn’t claim that this world has absolutely no connection to the *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens* game. The events of the

series seem to touch too many places for that. The events of Game 4 may actually have happened here.

Even so, the game is a game. The Queendom of Hausel is a neutral country that is staunchly pacifist. The ruler is a queen who is considered the top authority among all women who wield holy power. As a nation with advanced sacred and demon stone technology, the Queendom of Hausel creates all variety of magical items, including divine items, which use both sacred and demon stones. Particularly famous divine items include the holy sword given to the Kingdom of Ashmael to vanquish the fiend dragon, and “mirrors of truth,” which expose any men and demons who attempt to trespass on the Queendom’s territory.

This is a real country inhabited by real people. This is the world where Aileen and the others live.

“In any case, this application is rejected.”

“Awww! I’d even asked Master Cedric to make flyers and siiiigns...”

“You made him do that? Who do you think your fiancé is? He is technically the second prince, you know?”

“Lady Aileen, you know as well as I do that Cedric really wanted to be an artist.”

“...I’m not the one who knows that.”

That was knowledge from a previous life.

Lilia flashes a smile. “True. All right, I’ll redraft my application!”

“Like I already told you, it won’t get approved.”

“But I know all about it! Prince Claude is in poor condition because his magic is unstable, correct? Master Cedric was worried,” Lilia says with a giggle.

Aileen is willing to make a major concession and acknowledge that Cedric is worried, but she dislikes that he told this woman about it. “I hate to disappoint you, but we’ve already dealt with that.”

“Hmm. Did you ask the holy king for some help? But you don’t know what’s causing it yet.”

Lilia speaks as if she does.

However, Aileen doesn’t let anything show on her face or in her tone, refusing to confirm or deny. Bringing her face close, Lilia smiles at Aileen’s carefully composed expression.

“In that case, isn’t it too soon to say the game is over?” Pushing the application back toward her, Lilia continues in a low voice, “Be careful, Lady Aileen. The abilities of Hausel’s queen include prophetic dreams and visions of the past.”

“I’m well aware. That’s general knowledge, even beyond the game. People say those abilities are passed down from one queen to the next, through the generations.”

“Doesn’t that sound like us?”

We know what should have occurred in the past, and what should occur in the future.

Falling silent, Aileen crushes the application in her hand.

“If you’re ever unsure about the game, Lady Aileen, come to me anytime.”

“...I refuse.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. Here, I’ll make an exception and tell your fortune right now! Let’s see. Lady Aileen...” Lilia’s eyes are downcast, making her seem oddly mystical. It’s almost as if she’s proclaiming she is the Maid of the Sacred Sword—even without the sword—and then her mysterious violet eyes sparkle.

“You and the demon king won’t consummate your marriage tonight, either! After all, there’s the ‘All Ages’ rating to consider!”

“Rachel and Serena, we’re leaving.”

Marriage is no excuse for carelessness. This holds true for even the crown prince and princess of Ellmeyer.

Aileen believes that the failure of their first night, the first step of their marriage, was due to carelessness. Falling sound asleep like that had been a grave blunder. Then while their marriage was still chaste, she’d been spirited away to a neighboring country, became the holy king’s consort, vanquished the fiend dragon, signed a treaty, and conducted diplomacy. In other words, Aileen’s spent a whole lot of her time doing other things, and as a result, she and Claude are still man and wife in name only.

However, that ends tonight.

After their return from the Kingdom of Ashmael, fielding the backlog of work has kept them busy for half a month. While there are still preparations for the Foundation Festival to attend to, the couple has finally managed to get some time for themselves.

In their bedchamber, Aileen stands tall. “Master Claude! Are you ready?!”

Skin, check. Cosmetics, check. Negligee, check. Preparations, check. Aileen has thrown herself into getting ready, and Claude gives her a firm nod. “I have completed all my duties and sent everyone away. I’ve also had a talk with the holy king. We won’t be disturbed. Tonight is the night, Aileen.”

“Yes, let’s make tonight a success!”

“Could we do something about the atmosphere, though?”

“The atmosphere?”

“That’s right. For example, would it be all right if I cleared away those implements behind you that we’re obviously not going to need?”

Aileen glances behind her. The bed is adorned rather ominously with an assortment of tools designed to help couples who are having difficulty in the bedroom.

There's a pillow in gaudy colors, designed for visual effect, while candles surround the bed. Dubiously colored wisps of incense permeate the air all the way to the canopy. Just in case, there are various nourishing tonics on the side table, containing preserved snakes and every manner of exotic ingredients.

By the windows that open onto the terrace, there's even an altar with a magic circle that's meant to resurrect the demon king. Aileen isn't sure about that one herself. Claude is the demon king, though, and she couldn't completely discount the possibility that having the magic circle around might help him relax.

"Does it bother you? This altar is quite genuine, you know. I thought it might aid your recovery, Master Claude." She'd gotten carried away and re-created the resurrection ritual exactly as she'd seen it in the game.

However, Claude grimaces. "No. I don't know what sort of recovery it's supposed to help, but just having it around is killing the mood. Weren't Rachel and the palace maids against it?"

"Yes, they were. Isaac and the others approved, though, and it is a private matter, after all. I thought we should discuss it before making a decision— Oh!"

Claude sweeps his hand to the side, and the bed is instantly back to normal. He used magic to clear away the marital aids.

"There's no need for those."

"Th-then what about this?! It's apparently quite intoxicating. Luc recommended it."

"Wait, don't drink that. No doubt we'd discover that you're sensitive to alcohol." Aileen cheerfully took out a bottle, but Claude confiscates both it and the glasses she produced. "You don't have to worry. Thanks to the holy king's present, my magic is stable." Claude points to a small earring made of purple crystal in his ear. Baal imbued it with holy power, turning it into a powerful amulet that acts like the holy king's barrier. It contains Claude's vast—and currently unstable—magic.

"I hate to admit it, but he is the holy king, even if he's a degenerate. At the moment, it's working just fine."

"...Yes, you're right, of course. I'm glad you've made such a good friend."

"Don't you start joking about it, too. He's not a friend."

"Oh, but I hear Master Keith prepared a guest room specifically for King Baal in the old castle."

Sighing, Claude removes his dressing gown and drapes it over the

back of a chair. “Yes, someone of my age and gender that my magic can’t kill has turned up, but Keith’s making too much of it.”

“And I’m sure that’s a very valuable thing. However, putting that aside, Master Claude, we really must identify the cause of your instability...” Remembering what Lilia had pointed out that afternoon, Aileen scowls.

“We have something else to do first, remember?” He easily scoops her up with one arm.

When he starts toward the bed, Aileen panics a little. Since the conversation got sidetracked, she’s no longer immersed in the situation. “Erm, um, let’s—let’s talk a little longer! Yes, once we’re properly in the mood, we’ll—”

“You don’t have to worry.”

The trusty implements that would have quelled any nervousness are gone. Their bed is normal again. Even as Claude lowers her onto it, he steals a kiss. She clutches his shirt, catching her breath in a way she learned only recently.

“...You’re getting good at this.” Claude gives her a slow smile; he’s already loosened the front of his shirt. Aileen has no resistance to that sort of sex appeal, and her boiling point is naturally low, so this easily breaks her limits. “Pl-please wait! Let’s rest for a moment! I-I’m nervous. I may make some sort of mistake.”

“It’s all right. You don’t need to do anything. Just leave it all to me.”

“But I don’t want that! I—I want to do something for you as well, Master Claude.”

“Then give yourself to me, just as you are.”

His red eyes gently implore Aileen, and her will to resist slips away. It may be for the best. *We are married, after all.*

If she’s uneasy and doesn’t know what to do, then perhaps leaving it to him would be fine. That can’t possibly be considered laziness or weakness.

“I love you, my Aileen.”

Claude seems to have sensed the tension leaving her because his tone has changed. It’s quiet, but she feels as if her temperature has risen. Still, the hand that touches her cheek and neck is supremely gentle.

Slowly, she closes her eyes.

After this, she’ll truly be the wife of the demon king. Claude’s wife

—but then, something clatters.

Aileen’s eyes blink open. Claude pauses in the act of undoing the ribbon on her nightdress.

“I just heard...”

“It’s your imagination. It’s categorically your imagination. If it isn’t, I’ll never forgive it.”

“B-but...”

She hears the noise again. It isn’t coming from outside. It’s in the bedchamber. “...It isn’t imaginary, Master Claude.”

“Interrupted, when we’ve gotten this far? That’s completely ridiculous...!”

Glaring light illuminates Claude’s despairing profile. Aileen looks toward its source, then sits up, pushing Claude away. “Th-the altar to resurrect the demon king?! What? But why?”

She’d made that altar only because it had seemed like the right thing to do. Even in the game, the ritual to resurrect the demon king had failed.

In any case, the demon king is already here.

However, a blast of magic rages around the altar. The lock on the terrace doors blows off, and the doors swing inward. The curtains flap wildly while the furniture begins to clatter as well.

“Aileen, stay close to me.”

Claude seems to have mentally switched gears. Keeping a hand over one ear, he pulls Aileen toward him with his free arm. The purple crystal in his earring has turned bright white. Its holy power has activated.

“M-Master Claude, it can’t be... Is your magic out of control?”

“No, it’s that thing. It’s responding to the magic in the altar.”

A flash of magic-filled light bleaches the room silvery white, dazzling her.

“—Ahh, I haven’t been to the human realm in ages. Seriously, finding a suitable exit here was a big help.”

Someone steps over the shattered fragments of the altar, and a shadow stretches across the floor.

Still held to Claude’s side, Aileen strains her eyes, squinting at the source of the light.

The man’s rather flyaway silver hair is brushed to the side, revealing beautiful features that are practically a work of art. The straight bridge of his nose, his thin lips, the contours of his cheeks, even the tips of his eyelashes—they’re all so exquisite, they might have been shaped by the hands of the gods themselves.

It’s a violent beauty, the sort that steals the hearts of all who see it...a beauty much like Claude’s.

It...can’t be...

Involuntarily, her hand tightens on Claude’s shirttail.

The man’s eyes are red. The proof of one who possesses magic. Those bloodred eyes smile slowly—and then they fill with tears.

“CLAAAAudewaaAAAAaaah, your dad missed you soooo

muuuuch!”

“Huh?!”

The man charges in and throws his arms around Claude, shoving Aileen away. Claude tries to catch her hand, but freezes mid-motion.

“Oh, you don’t recognize me, huh? I guess not, now that you’re all grown up. Maybe you would have when you were a baby, though! Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, you’re my son all right. You sure are cute. Do you remember me at all? I’m your dad!”

“We don’t have the faintest idea who you are!” On the bed, Aileen has promptly recovered, and she quickly clings to Claude again.

The suspicious character who’s abruptly appeared from the altar gives her a cold glare. “Huh? Who’re you? What do you want with my Claude?”

“I am Master Claude’s wife! What business do you have with my husband?”

“You’re kidding! When did you get married, boy?! I never agreed to this! No wonder the other one’s mad... Your dad’s not letting you marry without permission, either!”



“It hardly matters whether you grant us permission or not! We’re already married!”

“Huh? Okay, so divorce.”

“What do you think you’re doing to Master Claude?!” Aileen has summoned the sacred sword, and she thrusts it at the man. It won’t work on him if he’s human.

If he’s a demon, though...

There’s a snap, and the man’s hand flies off Claude’s shoulder.

“The sacred sword, huh? That takes me back. I think you shaved away a good chunk of my magic there.”

She felt the blow hit home, but that’s all. The man smiles as if nothing happened.

“I think that earring’s in the way, too. I guess I can’t send him back to the demon realm by force.”

At that point, Claude finally plants his hands on the bed and exhales. He’s been bound by the man’s magic this whole time.

Hastily, Aileen puts her arms around him, supporting her husband. “Master Claude, are you all right? Does anything hurt?”

“I’m...fine. I just couldn’t move.”

“I see, I see. So the girl’s capable of that much. Still, in terms of the oath, this is a bad move. The seal on the true form has nearly come undone... You can tell, right, Claude?”

The man looks down at them, red eyes gleaming. In terms of both cruelty and beauty, the smile on his lips is just like Claude’s.

No, technically, that’s not accurate.

It’s Claude’s smile that is just like his.

“Your dad’s warned you over and over that now’s the time and you need to head on home. You wouldn’t listen, so I had to come pick you up.”

Aileen recognizes this man’s face.

She’s seen it in game art.

“Your name... What is it?”

“A mere human dares to ask the name of a god? —Kidding! The wife would get mad at me if I put it like that.”

There’s no guarantee that the game is over. The conversation from that afternoon rises in her mind.

“My name is Luciel.”

It’s the same name.

“I’m your father, Claude.”

“...I have absolutely no memory of you.”

“Let me put it another way, then: I am the world’s very first demon king. The god who rules over the demons.”

The scenario matches as well. Aileen bites her lip, hard.

The hero and final boss of *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 4*...!

“Hurry home to the demon realm, Claude. You don’t want your true form to take over and turn you into a real monster, right?”

As if Luciel has seen through everything, a benevolent smile blooms on his beautiful face.

The history of Imperial Ellmeyer begins with the legend of the Maid of the Sacred Sword. It’s the same story that *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 4* is built around.

In short, Game 4 is set more than six hundred years in the past. Knowing its content is really more like studying history than anything game-related.

On her sixteenth birthday, a girl named Amelia from the region of Mirchetta is chosen as one of the Queendom of Hausel’s royal candidates. Once she arrives in the academic city, where the other candidates are locked in competition, she meets the love interests. Grace Dark, the candidate considered by many to have the best chances of becoming queen, tries to get in her way. Ultimately, Amelia perseveres, takes the royal exam, and discovers the secret of her birth. On top of that, she must choose between becoming the queen of Hausel or the Maid of the Sacred Sword... At any rate, that’s the basic plot of the game.

Historically, a woman named Amelia Dark received the sacred sword from the Holy Queendom of Hausel, became the Maid, slew the demon king, and founded Imperial Ellmeyer. This is the game’s main route, and it matches the Maid of the Sacred Sword ending.

One big difference between Game 4 and its predecessors is that the previous games treated the final boss as a secret hero who couldn’t be romanced until the second playthrough. In Game 4, he’s also the main hero.

The name of that hero and final boss is Luciel, a young man possessing inhuman beauty who disguised himself as a student but is actually a god who rebelled against the creator and was thrown into the demon realm. He is the father of all demons and the first demon king.

Luciel’s power is beyond imagining. On first glance, he appears to be a kind, good-natured youth. At heart, he’s merciless and cruel, and as the game progresses, players begin to catch glimpses of his true nature. He whispers sweet nothings to the protagonist and becomes her lover only to corrupt her precisely because she is likely to become the Maid of the Sacred Sword someday. If she chooses to walk the path of justice anyway, he promptly changes his tune.

His freezing-cold red gaze makes even the heroine shudder—

“Uh, excuse me, Aileen? There’s some dust here...”

However, the game is one thing and reality quite another.

In the old castle, Luciel points ostentatiously at some dust on a windowsill. “You certainly don’t clean very thoroughly. How can it take you so long to get to something this simple? As things stand, I really can’t acknowledge you as Claude’s wife.”

Aileen’s hair is pulled back into a braid; she’s wearing a triangular kerchief over her head and holding a duster. She replies with a smile. “You just deposited that dust there, didn’t you, Father?”

“What a terrible accusation! I’d never do a thing like that, would I, Almond?”

“Huh?”

Almond has been watching them through the open window, looking worried. He flinches, sending a shiver through his wings. Feigning tears, Luciel buries his face in the crow demon’s fluffy black chest. “Aileen picks on me every chance she gets! She’s awful! Protect me!”

“M-Master... Aileen, no bullying! Ever!”

“See?! Isn’t she mean? Let’s just all go back to the demon realm together.”

“Huh? B-but... Demon king loves Aileen...” Almond looks around restlessly, his troubled gaze wandering to and fro.

Luciel grabs his head and leans in close. “It’s fine. He can just divorce this woman. Come on, let’s all go talk Claude around, all right?”

“Goodness... You know, I believe I have overlooked some rubbish after all.” Sighing, Aileen leans her duster against the wall. Then she grabs the back of Luciel’s head with one hand and pushes it out the window. “I forgot to get rid of the biggest piece of trash!”

“Whoa, hey, we’re on the third floor! Any normal person would die!”

“Rubbish isn’t alive, so it can’t die.”

“That was a really nasty way to put it! Waaah, Almoond— Oh, and Sugar over there! Help me, I’m gonna fall!”

“What are you doing to your father-in-law, you naughty wife?”

“Aileen, no! No killing the master!”

“It’s all right, Sugar and Almond. I’m only taking out the trash!”

“You never get rattled, do you. What a scary woman.”

Abruptly, she finds herself pushing nothing at all—Luciel is now floating outside the window. Almond and Sugar are flapping around him, worried. The demons have gone to his side as if it’s only natural, which Aileen finds exasperating.

James told her that, much like Claude, this man could be a

supreme being if he felt like it. Beelzebuth also knelt to him, respecting him on a different level from Claude.

Honestly! This is needlessly complicated!

The appearance of the demons' god, who is also the demon king's father—Luciel—has caused a massive uproar at the old castle, where a great many of the demons live. The merrymaking began on the evening he first appeared. Needless to say, Aileen and Claude had no success on what was supposed to be their first night together as a married couple.

Claude stayed silent the whole night. He frowned slightly, putting a single furrow between his eyebrows, and seemed to be watching every move Luciel made.

Remembering that sight makes Aileen's heart ache. Claude said only one thing to her: "I'm sorry for the trouble."

Did he mean the fact that he was simultaneously the demon king and human? Or the fact that his magic was unstable? Or perhaps because Luciel had turned up? Maybe even the danger that he might become a monster? His remark probably covered all of the above.

Of course, Aileen had married him with full knowledge of everything that came with it.

"What a boorish thing to say, Master Claude! It's all right. Just leave everything to me."

"I appreciate the thought, but leaving it to you wouldn't be very —"

"You needn't stand on ceremony. I am the wife of the demon king!"

"Well, well. The wife of the demon king, hmm?"

It irks Aileen when she recalls how casually Luciel had broken into a married couple's private conversation.

"In that case, you'd never lose to me, would you? Hmmmmm?"

And the very next day, Luciel began to systematically harass Aileen. It's a tale as old as time: the in-laws tormenting the new wife.

Since then, Luciel's been complaining about this or that trait, constantly nitpicking every little thing Aileen does. Apparently, it's the *If I just deal with you, Claude's bound to come back to the demon realm sooner or later* strategy.

Claude tried to stop him, but Aileen accepted his challenge boldly. She's fully committed to the *If you want Master Claude, you'll have to get through me* first plan.

In order to guarantee complete victory, Aileen's been staying at the old castle since yesterday to keep Luciel company. The Foundation Festival is rapidly approaching, but this is a job only Aileen can do. She asked her father, Rudolph, the prime minster, to reduce her duties as crown princess in the meantime.

When they told him about their father-in-law's sudden invasion, Claude begged him to stop her, but Rudolph smiled and shook his head. He simply gave her a thumbs-up and some bracing encouragement.

"If you lose this one, forget about ever coming home again!"

This made Claude drop his head in his hands, but this was no longer a problem between parents and children. It was a battle between a father and a daughter-in-law.

At some point Luciel offhandedly said, "This place is a little dusty. Isn't that bad for Claude's health?" And so Aileen has been cleaning the castle since the crack of dawn in order to shut him up.

"I am Claude's father, you know? A demon god, or something like that. Even if you carry the sacred sword, don't you think this fearlessness of yours is a bit reckless?" Luciel pouts, complaining.

Aileen smiles at him. "My, my. This, from someone who emerged from the demon realm but currently has no more magic than Elefas after suffering an attack from my sword. Exactly what should I be afraid of?"

"Lady Aileen, do you think you could stop using me as a measuring stick?" With a low murmur, Elefas appeared in the corridor. "Just so you're aware, among humans, I'm very nearly the strongest."

"I know. You're Master Claude's mage, and he's proud of you."

"Haaah. Then could you quit provoking that man, who is roughly as strong as I am? It's my job to guard you, and this is hard on my heart."

Ordinarily, Elefas works under Claude, independently of Walt and Kyle. However, Claude has charged him with guarding Aileen for the time being. She thinks his official mission is to protect her from Luciel, who's currently standing there saying, "Aileen sure is scary, huh? Oooh, scaaary," right in front of her and nodding away with Almond and Sugar. However, she also gets the feeling that he may simply be there to keep her in check.

"Do you really understand? This man may be stronger than Master Claude."

"You can call me 'Daddy,' too, Elefas! Humans who can use magic are basically my relatives! Not you, though, Aileen."

"Gracious, Father, how cold. We're already family, you know."

There are almost visible sparks flying between Aileen and Luciel.

Not for the first time, Elefas sighs. "As I keep asking you, please don't provoke him..."

"Lady Aileen! The laundry is finished."

"Oh, Rachel, thank you. And Serena?"

"If you mean the shopping, I did it. I left everything in the

kitchen.”

Rachel and Serena both appear from the hall. Rachel’s wearing a kerchief like Aileen’s while Serena is in a servant’s uniform.

When he spots them, Luciel gives an exaggerated grimace. He’s reentering the corridor through the window. “I asked Aileen to do those things. Isn’t this cheating?”

“Hey, Aileen, I passed that chair repair request from yesterday to Denis.” Isaac appears from the other end of the corridor and continues his report, his eyes never leaving a sheaf of documents in his hands. “Also, James has worked out a budget for the remodel on Demon King Senior’s room and gotten it approved. The work is underway; Auguste is overseeing it right now. They should be done before noon.”

“Thank you, Isaac.”

“Demon King Senior also insisted he wanted to eat the local specialties of ancient Ellmeyer. Jasper hunted down the documents and recipes, so we can make that happen. I’ve left that adviser in charge of seeing to the demon king’s personal needs. The frayed cloak and the other things Demon King Senior complained about should be repaired before the end of the day. While they’re at it, they said they’ll make him several new outfits. James is working out the budget for that as well.”

“Is there anything else that isn’t finished yet?”

“Lunch for you and Demon King Senior, courtesy of Luc and Quartz, but that’s about it.”

After a moment’s pause, Luciel—who has placed Almond on his shoulder—yells, “Using other people on this scale goes waaaay beyond cheating!!”

“Cheating? I’m simply using what’s available to me. That’s called skill.”

“As a rule, you’re supposed to be laboring all by yourself, you know?! I was this close to being a little impressed by how hard you’ve been working since early morning until this mess! Shouldn’t you put a little more effort into convincing your father-in-law to acknowledge you?!”

“I believe my job is getting results, not putting in effort,” Aileen declares boldly.

Luciel’s cheeks tense up. “Even so, there’s a limit, isn’t there?!”

“Goodness... If that’s how you think, Father, it’s no wonder you’re single now.”

One of Luciel’s eyebrows twitches.

Aileen flashes a smile that doesn’t go past her lips. She directs a question behind her. “Isn’t that right, Rachel? You wouldn’t want a husband with such old-fashioned values, would you?”

“No, I wouldn’t. It’s irrational, I suppose you’d say. I wouldn’t

want a father-in-law like this.”

Isaac’s gaze is wandering rather restlessly. Something in that remark may have struck a chord.

“What about you, Serena?”

“Oh, Ailey, there you are. They’ve finished remodeling the—”

“When men say they prefer handmade things or that cutting corners means your heart isn’t in it, I genuinely think they should drop dead. Those men make me sick.”

Serena’s answer holds nothing but scorn, and Auguste, who’s just rounded a corner, freezes mid-wave. He may have wanted something handmade.

“There you have it, Father. I think it’s fair to say your ideas are outdated!”

“Th-that was a respectable mental attack. I understand what you’re getting at, but—”

“Then allow me to deliver the coup de grâce.”

“Let people finish talking, okay?!”

“You say that I am not suitable for Master Claude, but I’m not convinced that you are a suitable father.” Luciel is aghast, but Aileen simply puts a fingertip to her lips and goes on. “I mean, ordinarily, the father of the crown prince is an emperor. As we are dealing with demons, perhaps I could give you a bit of leeway on that account. Even so, Master Claude is the demon king, so I think the desired level is the same. And yet, well, you know. I mean, how should I put it...”

“Could you quit with the smug smile and roundabout phrasing?!”

“Well, saying it plainly would be rather, um... I am a frail human, after all. The sacred sword doesn’t appear to work on you, and oh, if I were to be killed for simply telling the truth...!”

“You are really gifted when it comes to irritating people, you know that?! If you’ve got something to say, spit it out. I won’t get mad.”

“Everything about you is outmoded.”

“Lady Aileen...,” Elefas cautions her, pale-faced, but Aileen doesn’t stop.

“To be honest, even your table manners... We’ve dealt with your clothes by substituting Master Claude’s old outfits, but still... And your requests for your room’s remodel were just completely... You know?”

“.....”

“It’s embarrassing to me that someone like this is Master Claude’s father— I would really like to hold a tea party, not just a luncheon, but I’m concerned that issuing an invitation might be disrespectful to the guests...”

Luciel scowls.

Aileen can practically hear him grinding his teeth. She chuckles. “My, what a frightening look. I’d expect no less of Master Claude’s father, though. Even then, your face is beautiful... And the pleasure is just the same as if I were tormenting Master Claude... Oh, gracious, I’ve said something shameless.”

“Aileen’s scary! Master, you okay?!”

“I—I see...! Yes, I understand. Apparently I’ve underestimated you.” Wearing an insolent smile, Luciel rakes up his bangs. If nothing else, his face is handsome, so he looks good doing it. “I accept your lunch and tea party challenges, little girl!”

“By all means, bring it on. I’ll deal with you myself, without troubling Master Claude!”

“What sort of battle is this...?”

“A gloves-off fight between a woman and her father-in-law,” Isaac says impassively. Elefas looks haggard. Auguste claps him on the back and proposes a drinking party.

“I was technically given a report, but—”

“Master Claude! Welcome home.”

It’s afternoon, and lunch, the cleaning, and the routine duties are all out of the way. The tea is being held in the parlor of the old castle. When Claude pokes his head in, Aileen looks up, beaming. “Have you had lunch?”

“Actually, not yet. I had a little time before evening, so I came by to check on things.”

“In that case, let’s get you something to eat right away. Rachel.” When Aileen signals her with a glance, Rachel begins to prepare light refreshments. Her expression shows she knows exactly what to do.

Aileen is seated in an armchair, and Claude twines her hair around his fingertips. “Are you having trouble with anything?”

“Listen, Claude! Aileen’s awful!” Luciel, who’s facing her across a chessboard, starts complaining even though nobody asked. “She laced my lunch with a numbing potion!”

“...That happens a lot.”

“It does?!”

“Good grief. Trying to get things done promptly is a bad habit of yours, Aileen.”

“I do regret it. It does appear that it won’t be possible to get rid of him easily.”

“Wha—? Claude, this woman has warped your sense of ethics—
Ow!”

Luciel just tried to sneakily swap out a chess piece, and she pinches the back of his hand, hard. As he glares at her with tears in

his eyes, she snorts, pointing at the board. "I won't let you cheat. Come, Father, the next move is yours."

"Oh, come on! I don't wanna, this match is basically over already. You won by a mile! You're so mean! Not even a little nice!"

"Goodness, I couldn't possibly win against you, Father! Hurry, make the move that will turn the tables on me!"

"Now, there's some impressive sarcasm!!"

"...Have they been like this the whole time?" Claude asks Keith, who's come to stand behind him.

As he removes Claude's coat, Keith gives a tranquil nod. "As a result, the jobs we've been putting off are coming along nicely. On Lady Aileen's instructions, everything from the cleaning and repairs to the old castle to the remodel of Master Luciel's room has been arranged and should be completed soon. He finally ran out of ideas for new ways to harass her, so they've been playing chess since lunch."

"What's the score?"

"I've won every match! Father is kind, so he's holding back! Please don't misunderstand, Master Claude, it certainly isn't because Master Luciel is a tragically weak player."

A good wife makes sure to give her father-in-law the respect he's due. Tears bead in Luciel's eyes as he glares at the board. Aileen snorts at him. He must be moved by how considerate she's being.

Walt and Kyle, who've been guarding Claude, are both wearing complicated smiles.

"Wow. Incredibly, sweet Ailey has been dominating. I guess I shouldn't have worried."

"Mind your tongue, Walt. Lady Aileen isn't unscathed, either... probably."

"Well, once they get to a stopping place here, we should be able to hold our Good Job in Ashmael party," Auguste says, apparently referring to the drinking party.

Aileen is listening in quietly, but Luciel's gaze snaps over to them. "Wait, what, what's this? Are your friends getting together, Claude? I'll have to greet them, since I'm your father and all! What was your name again? Walt? Count me in!"

"Huh? Oh, um... No, that's—"

"Father, are you planning to muddy the waters and abandon the match?"

"Everything rests on you, Claude! Come avenge your dad!" Luciel grabs Claude by the shoulders and sits him down in front of Aileen. Then he leers at Aileen, looking more like the demon king's underling than the first demon king. "You'd never embarrass Claude, would you?"

Aileen draws a deep breath. Rachel unobtrusively pours her a

fresh cup of tea. "At last. The day of my first chess victory over Master Claude has come...!"

"Huh? You're seriously willing to demolish Claude with this board?! Don't you feel bad about that?! Agh, I hate this. Why did you marry a woman like her, Claude?! Your dad doesn't understand!"

"Well, she's cute."

Claude's candid remark makes Aileen freeze in the act of rolling up her sleeves. Then she quickly reseats herself in a well-mannered way.

As if she's been waiting for silence to fall, Rachel serves refreshments. Her considerate lady-in-waiting has prepared sandwiches and scones, so that they can continue playing while they eat.

Leaning back in his chair easily, Claude falls to thinking. "Still, this is an awful board... The match may end before we begin eating. What should I do?" He looks up at her through his eyelashes.

Aileen hastily averts her face. "E-even you can't turn this around, Master Claude. Oh, I know. If I win, you must heed a single request of mine, no matter what it is."

"How bold of you. The version of you who's pathetically sweet at night is also terribly precious to me, though. I'm sorry for making you sleep on your own last night. I'll be able to return tonight."

"I—I see. So you'll be back...tonight..."

"Yes. Tonight."

The significant tone of those words makes her feel restless. Attempting to regroup, Aileen takes another sip of her tea. "I won't fall for a trick like— What?" As she glances at the board to confirm Claude's move, she notices that the positions of the pieces have changed. "You...you switched them around, didn't you?! When?!"

"You wound me. You know I'd never do a thing like that. They were like this to begin with. Now then, if I win, what should I have you do for me?"

"Master Claude! That's cheating!"

She yells at him, flushing bright red, but Claude's only reaction is to spread cream on a scone, acting as if he has no idea what she's talking about.

Behind him, Luciel staggers. "Whoa... My son is scary... Did I raise him wrong? Is it because I left him on his own? Hey, you, care to explain?"

"You mean me, sir?"

"Yeah. The demons told me you're the one who knows Claude best."

"Keith. You may go to that drinking party as well."

Aileen has been huffily chewing on a sandwich, but Claude's

remark makes her look up. "...Are you sure that's all right, Master Claude?"

"Yes. You'll be looking after me, won't you?"

"That isn't what I meant. I'm not sure it's wise to leave that failure of a father to his own devices."

"Failure of a father?! Uh, I heard that loud and clear, all right?!"

"It's fine. He won't force me into anything. After all, he is a 'father' who cares for his son. Besides, there isn't much he can do right now."

Claude's quiet decision makes Luciel's eyes widen. Then, suddenly, he smiles. It's a dreadfully beautiful smile. It's gone in mere moments, but Aileen has seen it straight on, and she squeezes her hands into fists.

"Yes, yes. You know me well, Claude. That's right. You're dear to me, and on top of being separated from my true form as the demon king, I've lost a ton of magic thanks to the sacred sword. I'm worthless. That means, no matter how I scream or cry, it won't rain and the ground won't crack. It's the picture of peace. It would be great if it were always like this, but..." Spreading his arms wide, Luciel laments theatrically, "They always yelled at me, saying it was my fault the weather was unstable. That hurts, doesn't it, Claude. Don't you think if people are silly enough to die from little things like lightning and tornadoes and volcanic eruptions, it's their own fault?"

"...No, I don't."

"Heh-heh. I see. You take after your mom there."

"—By Master Claude's mother, you mean the Maid of the Sacred Sword, don't you?"

With a bang, the chessboard explodes into fragments. None of them fly Aileen's way, thanks to the magic barrier Claude has reflexively cast.

However, it's enough to remind her who she's dealing with.

"I wouldn't speak of my wife casually, human. The true form is listening in, through me." Luciel taps his ear with a finger. He's smiling, but his gaze chills her to the bone.

The emotion he's turned on her is nothing less than fury—a bottomless rage that could destroy the world and still not be sated.

"I'd be careful. You in particular tend to irritate the true form. You are the Maid of the Cursed Sword anyway, not the real Maid of the Sacred Sword. No half-formed sacred sword could defeat the true form."

"'Half-formed'? And 'the Maid of the Cursed Sword'...?"

"That's what they call girls who steal the sacred sword. Is that word not around anymore? Well, not that it matters," Luciel says, summarily dropping the subject. "Unlike me, my true form can't be

reasoned with. The magic your sword shaved away will recover in time. When it does, I'll send Claude back to the demon realm by force, and that will be that. In other words, I haven't lost, all right?!"

Luciel snorts, standing tall. He doesn't seem to notice that the people around him are thinking, *Tell me he didn't just want to say that.* Granted, it appears to have dissolved the tension.

Sighing, Claude murmurs, "I won't let you send me back by force."

Luciel looks down at him with eyes that are somehow dispassionate and pitying at the same time. "In that case, Claude, what will you do if the true form's seal breaks?"

"Well..."

"Even you can feel that it's angry. The true form's oath is basically a spell, a curse placed on itself. It could easily start to affect reality soon. Or do you plan to let it take over completely and make you devour that girl?"

With a gasp, Claude looks Aileen in the face. His expression makes her ball her hands into fists in her lap. The sweat that broke out on her palms when the chessboard exploded has already passed. "Gracious, I wouldn't mind one bit if Master Claude ate me."

Everyone stares at her, shocked. In contrast, Luciel frowns. "Even if you were fine with it, Claude would hate it. I swear, this is the trouble with humans."

"Father, when you say Master Claude's true form will take over, you mean he'll turn into a demon, correct? In that case, couldn't I use my sacred sword to return his humanity to him?"

"Nooooope. Like I said, your sword is incomplete!"

"Then what must I do to perfect it?"

"No idea. The one thing I know for sure is that you can't protect Claude. That's why I'm telling you to send him back to the demon realm! If he's there, the true form won't try to use him as a channel to emerge in the human world."

"I understand, Father! I've been terribly rude to you." Rising to her feet, Aileen gives an elegant curtsy. The gesture is perfect down to the movements of her fingertips. "I truly was an unsuitable wife. The only thought in my mind was wiping the floor with you."

"Huh? Where's this coming from? You're creeping me out."

"You are a splendid father to Master Claude. I fully understand that now!"

Luciel shudders, backing away. She grabs his hands firmly, refusing to let him escape. "I apologize for my discourtesy. Yes, for clearing away all your criticisms with ease, and for utterly trouncing you at chess, and for considering you a failure of a father, and for continuing to make fun of you..."

"You're still using present tense!"

"And so please tell me: How can I quell the true form's anger?"

Luciel's eyes widen in surprise. Gazing straight into them, Aileen smiles. "Wouldn't that allow Master Claude to avoid returning to the demon realm? On the whole, that seems to be what you are saying."

She has a million questions.

Since the Ellmeyer Empire was founded, Luciel's wife must be Amelia Dark. Why would speaking of her, a woman extolled as the Maid of the Sacred Sword, draw the true form's anger? In the Maid of the Sacred Sword ending, the demon king seals himself—this is probably what Luciel is referring to when he says "true form"—into the demon realm. He marries Amelia as a human, then reverts to godhood after death...so why is Luciel standing here proclaiming to be the original demon king?

She can think of one possible explanation for that last bit. There is a second route generally known as the Queen ending. On that route, Amelia chooses to become queen, while Luciel chooses the path of the demon king, both dreaming of a future in which they'll be united. Even on that route, though, he eventually revives as a human and goes to find Amelia.

There is no game route where he revives as the demon king.

However, there's no point in speculating about such matters. The issue is that something has angered the true form, its seal is coming undone, and Claude may very well be dragged into the mess.

"Father, you're worried that Master Claude may be taken over by the true form. Should that happen, as things stand, he'll have no way to return."

"...Yes, but..."

"Then let us think of a way to prevent the true form from taking over. As I said earlier, if it is angry, I believe the best plan would be to address it directly."

"Well, maybe so, but you say that like it's a simple matter..."

"—If we do not, Father, Master Claude will hate you."

She seems to have hit him where it hurts. Luciel has put a hand over his heart.

All his harassment over the past few days has shown her quite clearly how dear Claude is to him. Capitalizing on this, Aileen smirks up at him. "Now then, Father, shall we work together?"

"Y'know, sweet Ailey looks like a con artist to me."

"That's disrespectful, Walt."

Ignoring the insolent guards behind her, Aileen smiles kindly at Luciel. "All right. Tell me, Father. Why is the true form angry?"

"Oh, that. It's because Claude's not keeping the demon king's oath."

“An oath. Yes, you mentioned that earlier. What sort of oath is it?”

“He’s not even trying to find his destined lover—”

Abruptly, Luciel vanishes.

An awkward silence spreads through the room. Slowly, Aileen’s eyes turn to Claude. The sacred sword may have reduced Luciel’s magic, but he still has as much as Elefas, meaning the only one who could forcibly teleport him is her husband.

“Master Claude. ‘Destined lover’ refers to a woman, correct? I would be quite startled if it didn’t.”

“You are my only destined lover, Aileen.”

“It is a woman, isn’t it? When did you swear this oath, and exactly what was it? Did you pledge to marry her? From the gist of this conversation, that’s bound to be it, isn’t it?”

“...Aileen, you’ve got the wrong idea about somethi—”

“That was mean, Claude! Forcibly teleporting your dad! I fell into a volcano!”

Luciel has returned, a bit scorched, and Claude *tsks*. “So that wasn’t enough to kill you.”

“Welcome home, Father! Now, let’s continue our conversation. Tell me the name of this destined lover and where she lives and her personal history. And be specific.” Aileen closes in on him, wearing a brilliant smile.

Luciel backs up. “Huh? I dunno any of that—b-but if Claude sees her, he’ll recognize her at a glance!”

“My, my. So Master Claude will know her the moment he sees her...”

“Next time I’ll sink you into the lava.”

“Claude, why did you turn out like this?!”

“Master Keith, shouldn’t we stop them?”

“This is entertaining. I think we could just leave them to it.”

“Master Claude! Are you there?!”

Mere moments before the scene can get truly ugly, the door to the parlor flies open. Claude turns, obviously relieved. “James. What is it?”

“—I-I’m sorry, but can I trouble you to come with me?” James has dashed into the room, but as soon as he looks around, his tone turns evasive.

Claude rises to his feet, leaving the chessmen. “Very well. I’ll go.”

“Master Claude, I won’t let you escape.”

“This is work. It can’t be helped. Isn’t that right, James?”

“I don’t really understand the context, but this matter is urgent.”

On hearing James’s words, Aileen is about to reluctantly back down when another voice cuts in. “My daughter doesn’t require that

sort of consideration, James.”

“...Father?”

Rudolph, the empire’s prime minister, has appeared, and Aileen blinks. James hesitates but clears the way for him.

“Aileen. How’s the father-in-law subjugation going? Well?”

“Subjugation? Perish the thought. Using him seems as if it may be more beneficial. I’m considering changing my approach.”

“That’s my girl! Then you’ll have the backbone to use one more thing, won’t you?”

“Excuse me?”

It can’t be. Am I the one James was trying to be considerate of?

Rudolph pivots to face Claude. “Prince Claude. I trust you’re familiar with the Queendom of Hausel’s royal exam?”

Understanding that he’ll simply have to hear the report here, Claude settles into an armchair. Realizing that now isn’t the time to be making a fuss over a destined lover, Aileen falls silent as well.

“Yes, they should be nearing the final test. Don’t tell me they’ve selected a queen already.”

This event that will decide the next queen of Hausel isn’t a matter they can ignore as some foreign country’s business. The Queendom might be a neutral, pacifist nation, but in light of the incident in Ashmael, they obviously have a bone to pick with Ellmeyer, whose next ruler will be the demon king.

The next queen’s policy will set the tone of what comes after.

“No. The final test is just beginning. Its content was announced this morning.”

“The content of the test? Is it something to do with us?”

“Yes. I’m told the test is ‘to foster love with the demon king.’ Apparently, only a woman who wields great holy power can bear the demon king’s child. Put bluntly, anyone who wants to pass the test needs to carry the crown prince’s child.”

Claude, who was about to swallow a mouthful of tea, chokes.

“To that end, a bridal procession is currently headed straight for the imperial castle. Naturally, it consists of the Queendom of Hausel’s royal candidates. We’ve also received an official notice from the Queendom.”

“Hausel... I knew it. So the power of the oath is already at work, and the destined lover is on her way here?” Luciel covers his face with a hand, groaning.

Aileen’s eyebrows twitch.

Her father responds cheerfully, “Destiny... I see. They do say that Her Majesty is able to see the future. That was aptly phrased. Give it your best, Aileen.”

Rudolph glances at his daughter. He loves to see her squirm,

which explains why he's in such an extremely good mood today.

"They're all hell-bent on becoming Master Claude's favorite mistress."

In other words, Aileen's troubles are only just beginning.

True to its name, the Queendom of Hausel's royal exam is a test to select its next queen.

Rather than being hereditary, succession in the Queendom is based on merit. Even if the queen bears a child, their offspring is not treated as a prince or a princess. Only the woman who manages to clear the test set by the queen is worthy of becoming her successor.

The content of the royal exam varies from test to test. There have been times in the past when the test itself was held in other countries. In other words, the basic idea of Imperial Ellmeyer being chosen as the site of the royal exam isn't unheard of. As a safeguard against cheating, the content of the test is kept secret until the day it is formally announced, so the fact that the notice had come so late also makes sense.

Still, the uninvited bride of another nation's next emperor? That seems dubious at best.

Aileen would love to point this out, but she can't. Such is the nature of politics.

"Her Imperial Highness, the Crown Princess."

As Aileen enters the throne room, twenty or so girls line up in the shape of a triangle, then bow their heads as one. Each girl holds the position flawlessly, down to the tips of her toes.

Aileen is wearing a silver crown and necklace set with jewels. Her opulent dress is practically dripping with pearls and the sort of lace that artisans take years to make, and she carries a splendid fan of peacock feathers. Slowly, she seats herself on the throne.

Rachel and her other maids had prepared her outfit, fuming all the while, saying things like, "Uninvited brides for the crown prince?! When he already has Lady Aileen?! Such disrespect!" "We mustn't let them make a mockery of us!" Claude dotes on her so intensely that she's forgotten, but maids tend to view anyone who threatens their mistress's position as an enemy. After all, their fortunes are directly tied to Aileen's position in the palace.

Even now, her maids are lined up along the wall, glaring daggers at the bridal party. Some of them suspect that Aileen may do something foolish and glare at her as well for good measure. Aileen fully intends to bring down Claude's uninvited brides, of course, but Rachel and the others are so determined that it's rather off-putting.

I mean, these are all younger girls. They're still students.

That doesn't mean she can afford to hold back, though.

Magnificently gilded carriages and wagons filled the grand avenue leading from the fifth layer to the imperial palace, and the visiting party scattered flowers along the way as they handed out wheat and candies to onlookers. No doubt they'd flaunted their procession—as if it belonged to a princess from another land who'd come to marry—because they were confident they'd be given a warm welcome. As a matter of fact, that's exactly what's happening.

The Queendom of Hausel's royal exam is always announced throughout the world. This is done for political reasons, of course. The question of how to handle their relationship with the Queendom is a diplomatic one.

In addition, while the royal candidates may be students, they've all received an advanced education. If no new ruler was being selected, they would have become government officials and priestesses in order to assist the reigning queen. Since only the queen knows when a royal exam will be held, all female students receive a royal education.

On top of that, as this is the final test, these girls are undoubtedly vying for the throne.

Aileen recognizes their identical outfits. The veils that hide their faces and the simple white school uniforms that make them resemble priestesses match a piece of art from *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens* 4.

Since there's a possibility that some destined lover is a part of this contingent, she has just one course of action...

Crush them.

"Welcome, guests from the Queendom of Hausel. Please be at ease."

With the permission of the crown princess—composed and ever graceful—the girl at the front of the group raises her veiled face. This is probably the candidate who's closest to becoming queen.

"Thank you very much, Your Highness. Crown Princess Aileen, we are delighted that in your gracious serenity, you have consented to grant us an audienghth!"

She flubbed it.

Beneath her veil, the candidate puts a hand over her mouth. She's trembling. It's quite clear that she'd carefully composed each and every phrase. In spite of herself, Aileen says what she's actually thinking. "—So close. You almost had it."

"I-I'm terribwy sorr..."

"Don't let it trouble you. However, what do you intend to do, with the crown prince absent?"

Feigning ignorance about the exam details, Aileen prompts them

for an explanation. The girl at the front has straightened up, but uncertainty creeps into her tone. "His Highness the Crown Prince is... not here...?"

"Indeed. The recent incident in the Kingdom of Ashmael has made certain adjustments necessary, and they have yet to be completed."

Until it becomes clear what the Queendom of Hausel is planning, they've decided to say that Claude is in Ashmael. The truth is that he's in the imperial castle and probably watching them. The strategy is a risky one; they're working out the details of the story with Baal in Ashmael even as they speak. Still, Claude is the one this bridal party is after. No one is foolish enough to wave bait they can't afford to lose in front of a lion.

When Aileen had suggested claiming Claude was absent and letting her deal with the candidates on her own, Claude was initially against it. However, Prime Minister Rudolph had given her a thumbs-up and sent her off with the words "If you lose this, don't even think about coming home!" As it had been with Luciel, his encouragement was correct.

Losing to her father-in-law or to a bunch of girls with ambitions of becoming a second consort or concubine would crush any possibility of Aileen becoming empress. She couldn't possibly return to the d'Autriche duchy after that.

Claude was worried, but this is a woman's battle.

The girl who's serving as its vanguard totters, staggering back.

"Wha—? Young lady?"

"I-I'm all right... I'm terribly sorry. Physically, I'm rather frail..."

Is it really a good idea for someone like that to try and become queen? It's another country's domestic business, but Aileen finds herself feeling concerned. *Besides, a royal candidate with fragile health... No, it couldn't be.*

As she shakes off an unpleasant premonition, the girl at the front turns to the two behind her for advice. "What shall we do? If Prince Claude isn't here, then the test won't—"

"We simply have to wait until he returns. It's no reason for us royal candidates to back down."

"That's right. The test has already begun."

"As you've seen, our Foundation Festival is approaching, and things are quite hectic here. Had you informed us beforehand, we could have adjusted our schedules, but..."

Aileen places the blame squarely on the sudden visit, emphasizing the fact that it isn't their fault. The two in the back respond.

"We really can't apologize enough. We're well aware that our visit is a discourteous one."

"No doubt it's a disagreeable proposition for you, but please allow

us to stay.” As is custom, the Queendom of Hausel will cover all expenses of the exam. The girl’s explanation continues smoothly, “This is the Queendom of Hausel’s royal exam. In Your Highness’s wisdom, we’re sure you’ll understand the implications of that.”

Not only that, but she’s calmly issued a threat. The two in the back seem to be made of sterner stuff. Since she’s dealing with students, Aileen almost lowered her guard a little, but this sharpens her focus again.

“Are you implying that the Queendom of Hausel wishes the relationship between our countries to be an amicable one?”

“Yes, Your Highness. This is, in part, an apology for the earlier accident with the ship. That unfortunate misunderstanding pained Her Majesty as well.”

Aileen slowly narrows her eyes, opening her fan to screen the lower half of her face. *Accident. Unfortunate misunderstanding. So that’s their angle.*



The subject of the Queendom's royal exam is fostering love with the demon king. It's a test to see whether or not the candidates can conceive Claude's child. It's also a tacit announcement that they approve of the queen's child being the demon king's child as well.

In Hausel, the queen's children have no rank. However, in Imperial Ellmeyer, the emperor's children are considered royalty. Even if born in the Queendom of Hausel, that child would be recognized and granted assistance. Demon king or not, if the emperor sires a child with the queen of Hausel, other countries will no longer be excessively wary of Ellmeyer. The Queendom's influence is simply that powerful.

"Of course, we do not arbitrarily claim that this is for the good of the Ellmeyer Empire. The royal exam merely selects the queen of Hausel. It is not intended as a political tool; it is a path meant to lead us to the correct future revealed to Her Majesty in dreams."

"And you say the task set for the next queen, in the service of guiding us toward a correct future, is 'to romance the demon king'?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"To what end? You are striving to become queen. Let me hear your views on the subject."

The two in the back step forward first.

"I believe it's meant to guide people to happiness. To do that, the power of the throne is necessary."

"In the beginning, at the gods' side, the sacred and the demonic were one. Her Majesty is a symbol of the sacred, while the demon king symbolizes the demonic. If they are wedded, it will show the world how all things should be. The time has come to return to that natural state."

"I think it's to avert war with the demons."

Interrupting these headache-inducing armchair theories, the girl at the front finally breaks her silence. "Couldn't fostering love with the demon king mean working toward a mutual understanding with the demons as well?"

Fanning herself lightly, Aileen narrows her eyes. That is the future she herself is striving for. It isn't one that will be easily accepted, though. In fact, she can sense wordless opposition from the other candidates.

Still, if this girl becomes queen, that will be the Queendom of Hausel's national policy.

What concerns Aileen is the fact that she can remember reading that exact answer before in the game. It was a response that came from Grace, the villainess of Game 4.

"Besides, this is not the first exam to hinge on mutual

understanding with demons. One was held several centuries ago.”

“You refer to the royal exam attempted by the Maid of the Sacred Sword, founder of our empire. If I recall, its goal was to teach love to the god who presided over the demons, was it not?”

“That’s right. I’m impressed you knew,” the girl at the front says admiringly.

Aileen is now certain that her knowledge of the game applies here, but the information has only made her warier. “I understand your thoughts on the matter. However, if one of you bears His Highness’s child, while they may be a mere commoner in your nation, they will be a royal in ours. I trust this is not an attempt to gain a hold over us...?”

The answer comes not from the girl in front, but from the two behind her.

“The Queendom of Hausel has no reason to conquer Imperial Ellmeyer. If you are concerned, we will present a written pledge that the child forfeits all claims to your empire’s throne.”

“The qualifying candidate will have no need for the rank of consort or empress. She will become queen of Hausel.”

The ruler of the Holy Queendom of Hausel, a pacifist, benevolent nation that has pledged eternal neutrality. The girl implies that position is the equivalent of ruling the world.

“Please accept us, Your Highness. This test will pose no threat to your rank. In fact, it will protect your nation.”

That argument leaves her no room to object.

“—Prepare rooms for these young ladies as potential mistresses for Prince Claude.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Lady Aileen!” one of her maids says accusingly.

Aileen has the impression that lightning has struck outside the window as well, but her smile doesn’t falter. “This is a good offer. It can only benefit us.”

She can’t reject the offer just because she doesn’t trust these people. They’ve guessed as much, and that’s why they’ve brazenly come here uninvited.

“A wise decision. And when will Prince Claude return?”

“I really couldn’t say. He amuses himself by wandering around unpredictably. It’s troublesome for me as well,” she says, playing dumb, and the girl falls silent for a moment.

Closing her fan, Aileen recrosses her legs, smiling elegantly down at her from the dais. “That is how matters stand. I do apologize.”

“...I see. My question was a foolish one.”

“By the way, all of you—particularly you, the one in front...”

“Me, Your Highness?” The girl turns to face her squarely.

Aileen smiles at her. “May I ask your name and see your face? We will need to get along, after all.”

“In the Queendom of Hausel, it is the custom for a bride not to show her face until marriage—”

“Very well. Your Highness, I apologize for my rudeness.”

Silencing the objections behind her, the girl at the front slowly removes her veil.

Her hair seems to have been bound up in the veil somehow, and glossy black locks spill across her shoulders. Her tall, slender figure is refined. Her eyes are a deep violet—an unmistakable sign that she possesses sacred power.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I am Grace Dark.”

“Grace Dark...”

“That’s right. To tell the truth, I was named after Her Majesty.”

Grace looks shy. Aileen nods in understanding. If this could pass as a joke, she’d love to laugh.

It would have been one thing if it were only the name. However, that straight black hair and those deep violet eyes are impossible to ignore. Add the sharp, determined eyebrows, and her dignified features—that face is identical to Grace Dark’s, the villainess of *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 4*.

Aileen watches as Grace bows respectfully.

Not only that, but the test is nearly identical to the one in Game 4!

The game should be long past, over and done with. However, Aileen is well aware that even after the game ends, reality continues.

◆ Second Act ◆

Fate Will Never Lose to the Villainess

After the audience is over, the moment Aileen emerges from the throne room into the antechamber, her husband materializes in midair.

“Aileen. Are you actually planning to make those girls my mistresses?”

“Master Claude.” She puts her arms around him, clinging to him tightly. Claude freezes. “Do you love me?”

“—Yes, I love you.”

There must be scores of things he wants to say, but he listens to what Aileen has to say first, and she adores him for it.

“Me alone?”

“You alone.”

“What about this destined lover, or whoever she is?”

“I know of no such thing. I mean it. I had nothing to do with that oath, either.”

“—This is hard for me, too, but I’m trying to endure it! After all, we can’t very well refuse!” Aileen shrieks.

Claude’s expression turns serious. His big, gentle hand pulls out Aileen’s hairpins and caresses the hair that comes cascading down. “Aileen...”

“And the nerve of using someone’s husband as the subject of their royal exam! I’d planned to choose your mistresses personally, and they would have been far sweeter than these girls!”

“...Um, Aileen. We should discuss the fact that I don’t want any mistresses in the first place.”

“But I’ll endure it! After all, I am the crown princess!”

“Do you think you could accept my statement that I don’t want any?”

“Even if your so-called destined lover is among them, I’ll simply thrash her!”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve wondered this, but why don’t you ever listen?”

“And so we must find a reason for refusing that will be perfectly inoffensive no matter who hears it. We need time and information. Since they’ve hit us with a surprise attack, we’ll have to rally quickly.”

She feels the tension leave Claude. He puts his arms around her loosely, and she senses that her feelings have gotten through to him.

“...Can I send them all back by force?”

“No doubt they all wield holy power to some extent. It’s likely that it wouldn’t work. Besides, we must consider how it would look to other nations. If we fail to cooperate with the Queendom of Hausel’s royal exam and reject this magnificent offer they’ve made us, we’ll provoke unnecessary speculation.”

“You mean they’ll suspect that I am the evil demon king after all. Even though I’m devoted only to my wife...”

“We’ll delay them for a while by claiming that you’re absent. I shan’t hand you over so easily.”

She squeezes him tightly. Claude rests his chin on the top of her head. She can tell he’s smiling wryly. “I see. So you won’t give me to them?”

“Of course not. Letting some lowly queen of Hausel acquire you would be selling you ridiculously cheap.”

“I have the feeling you’ve sold me off at bargain prices before this...”

“Where on earth did you get that idea? I’m not so generous that I’d sell my husband at a discount.”

“I should have held you much sooner.”

“? But you’re holding me now...”

Realizing what he means in midsentence, Aileen releases him quickly and tries to back away, but he pulls her in even tighter.

“I don’t believe it’s too late, though.”

“Pl-please don’t say such things in broad daylight. Everyone will hear—”

“Prince Claude. Will Lady Aileen be changing in your bedchamber?”

She looks to Rachel for help, but her lady-in-waiting responds with a smile and an outrageous question. Behind her, even the maids are nodding encouragingly and striking muscle poses.

This sort of thing has never happened before. The appearance of the mistress candidates has caused them to form a united front on this particular issue.

“That’s a good idea. I’ll help her change.”

“Understood, Your Highness.”

“Rachel! Master Claude!”

Even as she yells, Claude easily scoops her into his arms. In a brisk, perfectly coordinated movement, the maids clear the way out of the antechamber.

A bell tinkles, the door to the corridor opens, and a messenger runs in.

“Their Highnesses are coming.”

“It is time for their rest.”

“Prepare their bedchamber.”

What is all this efficiency in the middle of the afternoon?

Aileen is stunned, but the maids ignore her. Lining up along the walls, they all bow their heads.

“““Safe travels.”””

“Where to?! Master Claude, put me down, please! Now is not the time for this!”

“I’m not supposed to be here. In other words, it won’t matter one bit if I don’t leave the bedchamber for days. When you look at it that way, uninvited brides aren’t so bad.”

“That is not the reason we’re pretending you are absent, Master Claude! Besides, there’s somewhere I must go!”

“Where?” She falls silent. That’s all it takes to put a brisk smile on Claude’s lips. “More secrets?”

Aileen has a fairly recent memory of a fight that began with an exchange just like this one. She mumbles, making excuses, “I-it isn’t a secret, per se... I’d like to discuss the sacred sword with, um, Lady Lilia...”

“What sort of discussion?”

“I want to confirm that statement about it being incomplete... I’m also concerned about what my father told us earlier. That remark about how only women with strong sacred power can conceive the demon king’s child...”

Aileen stole the sacred sword from Lilia, so her own sacred power is something granted by the sword rather than something she was born with. Hearing that the sword isn’t complete has made her even more uneasy. “I may not be able to have your child, Master Claude.”

“Don’t worry about that, Aileen. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

While he’s still speaking, the door to their bedchamber swings open.

Sunlight streams into the room, but their outstanding maids are whisking the curtains closed, dimming the light.

With no hesitation, Claude makes straight for the bed. She finds herself shouting, “You can’t be serious! In the middle of the afternoon?!”

“Our love has nothing to do with the time of day.”

“Moderation! Restrain yourself, if you would!”

Before Aileen can even finish shrieking, he drops her gently onto the bed. Slipping off his tie in the gloom, Claude turns back the pure white sheets, murmuring slowly, “Restraint? You are the demon king’s wife. You should be more wanton.”

“Because I am the demon king’s wife, I would like to preserve some semblance of restraint—”

Her fingertips connect with something warm. The sheets stir, and both Aileen and Claude stop moving to look.

There’s a human in the bed.

“I’ve been waiting for you, Prince Claude.” Coquettishly, a girl in a school uniform as white as the sheets sits up.

“We’ve warmed the bed for you.”

The girl isn’t alone, either. There are two of them.

She doesn’t recognize them. From the uniforms, she can tell they’re royal candidates, but that’s all.

The pair quickly slip out of the sheets, then begin unfastening their collars and undoing their sashes, getting right down to business.

“I love you, Prince Claude.”

“It doesn’t feel as if this is our first meeting. Whatever will I do? My heart is racing.”

“Just once, please show this pitiful girl mercy.”

“Only you can put out this fire that consumes me.”

One acts charming, her eyes damp, while the other acts like a mature woman, giddy with the heat of love. They both close in.

““Please, Prince Claude.””

It’s clear what they’re after.

Claude has frozen up. Aileen is the first one to get her wits about her, and she screams, “Master Claude, run!”

Aileen has always known that her husband is popular. It’s that damned face. If he weren’t the demon king, she imagines she would have had a very hard time indeed.

However, this is rather different.

I’m fairly certain that game was meant for a general audience...!

Some of the ported versions had sported age ratings, depending on the hardware, but even so, they definitely weren’t adult games. This had been true even of Game 3, which was set in a harem, and where terms like *marriage bed* and *nighttime visits* were bandied about freely. Game 4 had taken the story back to its origins, and its plot was rather orthodox. It depicted the protagonist’s growth as she discovered the secret of her birth and attempted the royal exam, and her tragic romance with the hero, who couldn’t escape his destiny of becoming the demon king.

It most certainly hadn’t been a game for mature audiences in which libidinous girls tried to make the hero theirs by simply mounting him.

“Lady Aileen! We’ve caught the candidate who hid under Prince

Claude's chair!"

"There's no one in the waiting room where he'll be changing! Not even in the dresser!"

"Thank you. Don't get careless, though. Some of those girls have sacred stones and will teleport into places. They also disable traps set with magic...!"

"Lady Aileen! Prince Claude is screaming in the swimming bath!"

She'd recommended the swimming bath over a narrow bathtub with only curtains for privacy, since the visibility would be better, but apparently her efforts had been in vain.

"We can't let our guard down for a moment... Is Master Claude all right?!"

"Kyle and Walt have rescued him!"

It's been constantly cloudy outside, and thunder rumbles incessantly. They must have startled him. Soon rain begins to fall—a veritable rain of grief.

Aileen hurries to the room where they've told her Claude is.

Poor Master Claude!

In the three days since the Queendom of Hausel's royal candidates arrived, the imperial castle has become a battleground crawling with female perverts who are targeting Claude.

If Claude seats himself in a chair, a woman appears from between its legs. If he tries to change clothes, another one emerges from the dresser and offers to help. Some even mingled with the maids and crept into his bath, so they removed all female servants from Claude's personal service... And now some have disguised themselves as men before attempting something indecent.

Claude is being hounded morning, noon, and night. It's gotten to the point where he's unable to carry out his duties. Since they'd decided before the audience to insist that the crown prince was absent, the preparations for the Foundation Festival and other administrative tasks are still going smoothly. What Aileen's worried about most is Claude's mental state.

"Master Claude! Are you all ri— You three, get away from him!"

As soon as Aileen opens the door, what she sees makes her raise the alarm and dash forward. The three girls who are pulling on Claude's bathrobe, trying to strip him naked, deftly avoid Aileen's kick and vanish. They're quick at running away.

Even if she tries to catch and question them, they always flee, and the incident gets lost in the shuffle.

"Those impudent little... Master Claude?"

Claude is in a corner of the room; he's wrapped himself in a thick, floor-to-ceiling curtain and seems to be sitting there, hugging his knees. He's curled up very small and won't come out.

“...Are you really Aileen?”

Those words make her chest feel tight. “Yes, Master Claude, I am. Come out, please. Let me see you.”

“That’s what they said a minute ago, and it was a trick.”

“If you can’t believe me, you may stay there. I don’t mind. However, you’ve just left the bath, haven’t you? Did you dry your hair?”

“I used magic to get rid of the water.”

“What about a change of clothes? We can’t have you catching a cold. Where is Master Keith?”

“There was a noise, and Keith went out to check on it. The moment he left, there they were...,” he mutters from inside the curtain. “Earlier, I was soaking in the bath when five of them suddenly appeared and mobbed me.”

“Master Claude...”

“I just... I can’t... I want to erase every woman but you from the planet!”

There’s a rumble, and the entire castle rocks. However, that isn’t enough to faze anyone anymore.

Through the Oberon Trading Firm, they’ve spread the word that Claude is being chased around by a group of royal candidates and feeling emotionally fragile. That news has spread all the way to the castle town. Thanks to that, people have been very understanding about the consistently stormy weather. Some of the aristocrats look as if they’d like to complain, but the royal exam is such a momentous event that no one dares to openly say anything.

“Calm yourself, please. There are kind women besides me. Look, Rachel’s brought you some fresh clothes.”

Kneeling in front of the curtain, she gently slips the garments under it. She hears fingers snap rather weakly, there’s movement inside the curtain, and then the bathrobe is pushed out. Aileen has Rachel retrieve it, then addresses the curtain again. “Master Claude, why not rest at the old castle today? You’ll feel more settled in a familiar place, won’t you?”

“...I can’t. Those women would take the demons hostage without a second thought.”

The fact that her husband is trying to protect the demons even at a time like this makes her swoon a bit.

“Besides, I don’t want you to see me looking pathetic. I’ll stay here for a while, so would you leave?”

“Master Claude... Please, no. You wouldn’t believe how you’re making my heart flutter right now...! It’s all right. I swear I’ll protect you!”

“Huh? But you’re not actually managing that, are you?” a voice

says behind her.

“Father...! I’d forgotten your very existence.”

“Mean! That said, I can see that things are rough right now...”

Apparently the sight of his son curled up in the curtain and refusing to come out has given him pause. Unusually, Luciel doesn’t mess with her. His eyebrows draw together, and he chooses his words carefully. “...Claude. Do you want to avoid meeting your destined lover that badly?”

“.....”

“If you keep avoiding her, you’ll only anger the true form more. Why not just face her?” Crouching down in front of the curtain, Luciel proposes something outrageous.

“Would you refrain from encouraging my husband to cheat?!”

“The demons are worried, you know? Beelzebuth and the rest. Even you must get it. You mustn’t make the wrong choice because you’ve fallen for a human woman. Not that I’ve got any right to talk, but still.” His voice is filled with tenderness and pain. He sounds like a real father. “I don’t want you to feel like I did. If you insist on not fulfilling the oath, then you really should come back to the demon realm — Gwufff!”

Aileen formed a blade with her hand and stabbed her fingers straight down at his back. They dig in, but she isn’t able to punch through.

“And what do you think you’re doing, Aileen?!”

“I was just thinking whatever made the sacred sword incomplete might be hiding inside your body, Father.”

“That’s a novel idea!! You hit me right between vertebrae just now!”

“By the way, what you just mentioned is nothing more than your own personal experience. It isn’t something Master Claude will go through.” When Luciel peers at her through narrowed eyes, Aileen faces them squarely. “I will protect him to the bitter end.”

“...How?”

“Uh, excuse me? You there?”

A call that seems as if it can’t possibly be directed at a crown princess reaches their ears. Rachel, who’s been waiting behind them, promptly chastises the speaker. “Lady Serena, at least refrain from acting like that in public.”

“Oh, I see. Then you don’t need to know about the royal candidates’ movements, right?”

Rachel sighs, giving up.

Aileen smiles slowly. “Thank you. Pulling all that information together in three days... I’d expect no less of you.”

“Thanks. I’ll be tacking on a rush fee.”

“That’s fine. Master Claude’s chastity is at stake.”

“Still, how did you manage to find out about the royal exam regulations?”

Part of the royal exam may involve chasing Claude around, but wordless pressure from the Queendom and other nations makes it impossible for them to complain. However, the royal exam has rules of its own. Even in the game, violations of certain rules would result in an instant Game Over. The game may have been set several hundred years in the past, but Aileen guessed that certain boundaries would still be observed, and upon investigating, her guess had proved to be correct.

Not only that, but over the intervening centuries, the rules had grown byzantine. As a result, it appears that no one has reviewed them exhaustively. There’s no way she won’t take advantage of that.

“Then let’s dig a hole and push them into it, shall we?”

“...Aileen?”

Claude has apparently been listening in, and he finally pokes his face out of the curtain. Aileen thinks he looks rather haggard. She smiles at him as gently as possible. “Wait just a little while, Master Claude. This will allow us to cut down their numbers. Oh, and Father?” Aileen claps her hands, calling Rachel and the other maids. She’s already decided on her strategy. All that’s left is executing it. “I believe it would be better for you to attempt to find this destined lover.”

“Huh? No, I’m separated from the true form. That oath doesn’t apply to me. I’ve also set restrictions on myself, so I’m pretty sure I won’t know who she... Huh? Wait. What is this?”

Luciel is surrounded by maids holding hair dye and a very particular set of clothing. He backs away, but they close in.

“Master Claude is your dearest son. You’ll gladly sacrifice yourself for his sake, won’t you?”

They may have completely different personalities, but Luciel’s beauty and magic are identical to Claude’s. This won’t require magic, and even holy power won’t be able to unmask him. He’s a brilliant body double.

A little under an hour later, Luciel—now disguised as Claude—is being chased around by royal candidates.

“I’m terribly sorry.”

Grace bows her head almost immediately upon being granted an audience in the drawing room.

Aileen, who’s already seated on a sofa, looks perplexed. “Whatever for?”

“The royal candidates. We’re making an awful nuisance of ourselves.”

“Don’t let it trouble you. I simply agreed to allow the exam to carry on. Still, it really is a shame that the candidates who remained until the final test wound up breaking the rules.”

Aileen feigns innocence, and Grace gives her a rather ambiguous smile.

Just the other day, the news that the majority of the royal candidates had been disqualified for various infractions had traveled from Imperial Ellmeyer around the world.

Ellmeyer could formally charge them with the crime of disrespecting the crown prince as often as it liked to no avail. It was an entirely different story if they had violated exam regulations.

Having thoroughly researched the rules, Aileen had carefully guided the behavior of the candidates who swarmed around Claude. For example, trouble between candidates—particularly physical violence—was forbidden during the exam. For that reason, if the candidates so much as bumped into each other when they attacked Claude, that could be considered an infraction. The candidates were all rivals to begin with. A simple suggestion to one of the victims that another girl had violated the rules was more than enough to convince them to cheerfully corroborate that claim with her personal seal. After gathering reams of evidence in this way, Aileen’s staff sent a list of the offending candidates to the Queendom and other nations.

Since this was the Queendom of Hausel’s royal exam, Ellmeyer was under pressure from neighboring nations to allow the exam to proceed unhindered. On the other hand, considering all the attention focused on the exam, no candidate who violated its rules could be crowned queen.

The Queendom had acknowledged the disqualifications with startling promptness, and the eliminated candidates had departed from Ellmeyer yesterday.

“Only you and a few other candidates remain, Miss Grace. That said, I hear the others have all been suspended over suspected infractions. Practically speaking, you are the only one left.”

Grace hadn’t participated in the scramble for Claude at all. While the other royal candidates had gone through the formal process of requesting an audience, only to immediately ignore all protocol to sneak into his bed, she’d waited obediently.

She hadn’t done anything, and so she hadn’t violated the rules. It was an ironic result.

“I imagine this means you’ve become the next queen of Hausel, doesn’t it?”

“No, it isn’t certain that the others will be disqualified. Besides, I

haven't even seen Prince Claude yet."

Without mentioning that Claude is resting in the bedroom just beyond this drawing room, Aileen smiles. "The recent excitement has left Prince Claude rather tired. The Foundation Festival is almost upon us as well... However, you're right. After the festival, we'll hold a tea party or—"

"You needn't go to extra trouble for my sake. I'm sure I'll meet him soon. If I'm to become queen, fate is bound to guide me."

"F-fate, you say..." Aileen's cheeks tense up a bit, but Grace nods. She's serious.

"Of course, I don't think fate will be my ally if I stand by and do nothing. Fates are easily twisted. Still, if you warp what should be, it won't result in a future that's more correct. I've seen several such cases."

"...That mindset is typical of the Queendom of Hausel."

The queen of Hausel is able to see prophetic dreams and visions of the past, taking advantage of powers that are handed down from generation to generation. The Queendom has used these powers to maintain its exclusively female population and neutrality for nearly two thousand years.

However, even those prophetic dreams show just one of a vast number of routes. They must choose the best course from among the many potential futures. Perhaps living in a country where those values are considered only natural inevitably fosters this kind of worldview.

"Possibly. I'm physically frail, and this is the first time I've left the Queendom..." In the middle of her sentence, Grace is struck by a coughing fit. Aileen signals Rachel with a glance, and she brings Grace a lap blanket. Autumn is approaching, and the nights are increasingly chilly.

"I'm sorry. The transitions between the seasons have been difficult for me since I was a child."

"It's still only evening, but you should go to bed early."

At Aileen's recommendation, Grace bows again and takes her leave.

Finally relaxing, Aileen sinks into the sofa. Her tea is stone cold, and Rachel prepares a fresh cup for her... *Really, I wonder how much of this is coincidence.*

The personal histories of the candidates who remain for the royal exam's final test have been publicly released, and so she hasn't had much trouble obtaining Grace Dark's background.

The girl is eighteen, born and raised in the Queendom of Hausel. As a child, she'd been delicate and confined to her bed, but her sacred power was surprisingly considerable. In fact, of all the candidates, her power is closest to the reigning queen's.

Her mother is the current queen of Hausel. In a word, Grace is a princess. In the Queendom, where succession isn't hereditary, this means nothing. However, sacred power is often passed down through bloodlines, and a surprising number of queens' daughters have become royal candidates, passed the exam, and become queens themselves.

Physically frail. Great sacred power. Both her background and her face are nearly the same as the villainess of Game 4... If she had a younger twin sister who was the Maid of the Sacred Sword, she'd be perfect.

Her personality is very similar as well. She's a little timid, but kind and determined—an intelligent character who makes skillful use of her public and private personas. In the game, she also gradually cornered the heroine Amelia, who was later revealed to be her twin. It almost seemed like she quietly strangled her with delicate silk string.

Of course, she isn't saying the real Grace is that sort of person, but there are too many parallels for her to write them off as coincidences. It really does seem like fate.

"Fate, hmm...?"

If the girl's "correct future" refers to the ending of the game, then Aileen and Claude's current situation is a mistaken future.

A destined lover...for Master Claude...

She thinks it's ridiculous, and yet she finds herself wanting to see him. Rising to her feet, she looks toward the bedchamber, but Rachel stops her. "Lady Aileen. Master Claude has gone to the old castle. He said he wanted to see the demons."

"Oh, has he? Then perhaps we should dine there."

"That's a good idea. I'll make the arrangements."

The royal exam isn't over yet, but she has fewer potential headaches. It looks as if she'll have one last chance to relax before the Foundation Festival begins in earnest.

In other words—

"Would it be best...if I slept at the old castle tonight?"

"Possibly so. Using the old castle may make for an effective change of atmosphere."

When she looks at them, Rachel and the maids behind her respond with knowing nods.

"Leave your nightclothes to us, please."

The mistress of the house and her maids all clench their fists, resolving that tonight is the night.

"Sire," someone calls, bringing his consciousness to the surface.

"Sire. It's time to wake up."

“...Beelzebuth? What is it?”

Relieved, Claude sits up. Noticing this, the fenrir who's been letting him lean against her gets up as well. At his feet, her child, Ribbon, yawns. Apparently they've been napping with him. He rubs his eyes.

Beelzebuth, who's holding his pocket watch, grimaces. “You were having a nightmare... Shouldn't you sleep a little longer, sire?”

“Oh...I'm fine. Seeing your faces made me feel better.”

Ribbon nestles close to him. He pats her head, then smiles at the demons who've surrounded him, as if they're standing guard. Almond flies to him from one of the trees that shade the lawn.

“Demon King... You look tired. You okay?”

“It's probably because of my turbulent magic. On top of that, things have been far too rough lately... I haven't gotten any proper sleep.”

“Sire. Are you really all right?” Beelzebuth kneels on the lawn. “Shouldn't you return to the demon realm for now and work out a way to settle this, as your father says?”

“It's fine, Bel.”

Knowing it isn't possible to hide things from the demons, Claude tells them, “Returning to the demon realm is a last resort. Living there will probably turn me into something longer-lived and closer to a demon. I'll no longer be human. Even if I return here later, it may be inconvenient.”

“I know. But... But...”

Beelzebuth looks ready to burst into tears. Claude pulls his head to him in a hug, then claps him on the shoulders twice. Beelzebuth groans. “You should tell Aileen, sire.”

“Can't you just follow my orders, Bel?”

“Of course I can. However, at that drinking party the other day, the holy king blabbed about everything to Keith and James and the guards and Aileen's underlings... You already know who your destined lover is, don't you? You know and you're avoiding her. That's what's made the king in the demon realm so angry.”

“I see. I really should have killed the holy king.”

He shouldn't speak about his anxieties so easily. He regrets it.

“If she learns that she alone was unaware...that woman may...” He can feel Beelzebuth shudder. “There's no telling what she may do, sire! She might even destroy the demon realm.”

“...You place an odd sort of trust in Aileen.”

He's impressed, and the other demons begin speaking up desperately.

“She'll confiscate our sweets.”

“They won't make us houses anymore...!”

“She may pluck us bald, sire!”

“Right— I know, I know. It’s all right. I’ll tell Aileen soon.” At that, the demons exchange relieved looks. Apparently, they were genuinely worried.

That said, even if I tell her, I’m not sure where to start.

As the demon king, he has a destined lover. Unfortunately, it isn’t Aileen. Aileen doesn’t share a soul with the human who was once the demon king’s—Luciel’s—wife.

That’s all this is, and yet that troublesome oath weighs heavily on his mind.

In the first place, he isn’t the one who swore it. Luciel did that on his own, long ago. Personally, Claude doesn’t even want to meet her. Fortunately, the holy king’s earring has stabilized his magic, and the interference from his true form has been drastically reduced. He can feel its anger, but if he encounters the woman carrying the soul the true form seeks and it activates some sort of weird curse— Even as he thinks this, he abruptly stops in his tracks.

A human woman is there. With a gasp, Beelzebuth tenses up behind him.

She slipped through my barrier.

Something similar happened before. Lilia Reinoise, his half-brother’s fiancée, had managed to pass through the barrier as well. Sacred power naturally stymies demons, and those who possess it are capable of such feats. That’s why the holy king drops by the old castle whenever he wants.

He sighs, and the woman seems to hear him. She turns around.

In the evening sunlight that lances through the trees, her black hair flows like silk.

The sight evokes a surge of nostalgia, as if he’s seen it somewhere before— With a dizzying jolt, his thoughts jumble together. A voice echoes in his ears. A woman who’s dear to him is calling.

“I’m sorry. I’m afraid I’ve wandered in by mistake...!”

Your pardon. I seem to have wandered in by mistake.

“Um, can you tell me where this is? Who are you?”

Where is this? Who are you?

“...I am...”

Who am I?

“Sire!”

Beelzebuth’s voice brings him back to his senses with a gasp. He realizes he’s put out a hand to touch the woman’s cheek.

Claude squeezes his fingers into a fist instead. Beyond them, the girl’s large violet eyes widen. “Sire...? Might you be Prince Claude?”

“—You’re...one of Hausel’s royal candidates, aren’t you?”

“Yes...! Oh, I’m so glad I was able to see you. This must be fate.”

Fate. A promise with a beloved woman.

They'd pledged to be united, someday in the future. *So find her, search for her soul.*

As if telling him to carry out that oath, her left hand touches Claude's.

Instantly, his racing heart falls silent.

Even he's startled by how much it's cooled.

"Oh, I should have introduced myself. I'm—"

"...Refrain from touching me."

This isn't her.

Quietly, Claude removes his hand from the woman's.

"Oh...I'm sorry. I didn't think."

"I've been informed about the royal exam. However, I'll have no wife besides Aileen, and I don't intend to take any mistresses." The girl listens to Claude's declaration impassively. It doesn't pain his conscience. "I intend to speak with the queen and have her revise the exam."

"Revise...?"

"I understand there's no precedent for that. However, it isn't a bad deal for you, either. You don't need to try to marry a man you don't love."

"Very well."

She accepts this more easily than he expected, and it bewilders him. "You aren't against it?"

"No. I believe in fate and I know what I must do." The girl claps her hands in front of her chest, as if in prayer, and then she smiles at him. She doesn't seem to have any ulterior motives. "Besides, I don't wish to trouble you, Prince Claude. For today, I'll take my leave. Um, could you tell me how I might reach the imperial castle? I do seem to have lost my way..."

"Almond. Guide her."

"Yes, sire!"

With a rustle of wings, Almond takes to the sky. The girl nods to him and begins to follow the bird but then turns back with a gasp. "Oh, I nearly forgot to introduce myself. My name is—"

"I know it. You're Grace Dark, correct?"

That has to be what she'd refer to as the fated name.

"Oh, good. You do know me. I'll be going, then."

Wearing a smile that seems to say it's only a matter of time before they meet again, the girl bows and goes.

After her back is out of sight, he exhales, and a wave of dizziness hits him. He staggers, and Beelzebuth catches him. "Sire! Sire, are you all right?!"

"The tension drained out of me, Bel. That's all. You don't have to

make a fuss about it.”

“Yes I do! Call Keith, and be quick about it!”

“Yip, yiiip-yip-yiiip!”

“Walt, Kyle! What are you doing?! Come and help!”

“Elefas! Elefas, respond! Or you’ll do the Love-Love Dance again!”

“...I’m telling you, it’s nothing.”

Even the surrounding demons have started to clamor, and Claude sighs. They’re about to rush him straight to bed without letting him object.

Well, I suppose that’s all right. They tell me Aileen is here as well.

Demons, loudly calling humans for help. It may not be what fate had in mind, but this is the future he wished for. It’s like a dream—On that thought, he starts to feel sleepy again. Stifling a yawn, he heads into the old castle, soothing the demons as he goes.

He doesn’t notice that his earring now has a small crack in it.

The burden on Claude seems to have been considerable. He’s sitting up in bed, but even before the lights in the bedchamber are dimmed, he’s nodding drowsily. As she watches him, Aileen feels secretly remorseful. “Master Claude. Let us retire for the day.”

Rachel and the others have worked hard, and she feels a little apologetic, but resting comes first. Claude opens his eyes, then lifts up the sheets beside him. “Come, Aileen.”

“I—I will, but... We are going to sleep, all right?”

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

Aileen looks puzzled. Then, as prompted, she slips into bed. Unsure how close she should get, she stops right before their skin touches, but Claude reaches out and pulls her to him. “I’m sorry. After you dressed so carefully for me.”

“I—I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“When my wife is so adorable, how could I imagine another woman might attract me?”

That inexcusable remark cools her head. Acting as if she’s going to nestle closer to Claude, she hauls him up by the shirtfront instead.

“Aileen, that hurts.”

“It’s only your imagination. And? Exactly what woman was this?”

“You don’t have to be angry. It’s all right... The man who claims to be my father made me think a bit.”

“Master Luciel?” When she relaxes her grip, Claude presses his cheek to her forehead.

“That’s right. On a fundamental level, particularly when his demonic aspects are considered, the demon king is the same being. That’s why the first demon king inevitably affects me.”

“Do you mean the true form that’s supposed to be sealed in the demon realm?”

“That’s right. After all, I inherited my magic from it. That man talks constantly of his wife, doesn’t he?”

“Of your mother, yes... They say she was the Maid of the Sacred Sword...”

“I’m not positive, but...it’s likely that her death was not a peaceful one. I think she was betrayed by humans.”

Aileen had suspected something along those lines. It’s the only way the man’s anger would make sense. However, other questions remain.

“After Amelia—the Maid of the Sacred Sword—became empress, the records show that she was blessed with heirs and lived happily. No doubt the disasters that struck the empire after its foundation were hard on her, and she did die young, but...”

When Imperial Ellmeyer was founded, before the Queendom of Hausel had even acknowledged it, the empire had been beset by many hardships. Amelia was blessed with children—a crown prince and a princess—quite early on in her reign, but the land of her domain had always been home to a large population of demons, and it wasn’t easy to convince humans to settle there. On top of that, it was constantly afflicted with earthquakes, tornadoes, and other natural disasters. Many claimed the demons were targeting the empress, determined to avenge the demon king.

Before the foundation of the empire, in the ending of the Maid of the Sacred Sword route, Luciel seals his “demon king” aspect into the demon realm and becomes human, so...I would imagine it was his true form that incited the demons.

In the empire’s third year, the Foundation Festival was held for the first time, and the empire was struck with a disaster so notorious that it still appears in textbooks. The unprecedented crisis began with a great earthquake. Then demons poured out of a rift in the earth and attacked anyone within reach. Historical texts call this the final resistance of the demons, who had lost their king. The ensuing battle lasted a full month. Naturally, with the Maid of the Sacred Sword on their side, the humans emerged victorious. Even so, the empire they’d spent three years building was razed to the ground.

That said, now that the Maid of the Sacred Sword had repelled the demons twice, other nations couldn’t ignore the country she had founded. The Queendom of Hausel formally established diplomatic relations, and in its fourth year, the Ellmeyer Empire became an internationally recognized nation. After that, the demons lay low and the disasters subsided, allowing the foundation for Ellmeyer’s current prosperity to be gradually put in place. However, immediately after

that, the empress Amelia suddenly collapsed and was confined to her bed. After battling her illness for several years, she passed away before the age of thirty. Theories flew every which way, some of them involving grand conspiracies—it was the price of using the sacred sword; no, she'd been poisoned, et cetera—but it was said that her eventual death had been peaceful, with no apparent suffering.

As if following her, Ellmeyer's first emperor—my father-in-law—also passed away. The crown prince had grown up splendidly, though, and so Ellmeyer still stands to this day...

The woman's life had been a turbulent one, but she probably hadn't been unhappy.

As Aileen broods, Claude plays with her hair, twining it around his fingertips. "I don't know what actually happened. The problem is that that man—or the true form—thinks it's true... And at the time, it gambled on the future."

"The future?"

"Yes. The true form swore to itself that they would be reunited in the future. That is the oath."

That's very like the Queen ending in Game 4.

On that route, Luciel remains the demon king, while Amelia becomes the queen of Hausel. They part ways, vowing that someday, when they are both released from their duties, they'll be united at last. In order to preserve the peace, Amelia reincarnates over and over, remaining queen. Then Luciel, who has been forgiven by the gods and become human, comes to take her home.

The era in which he went to her wasn't specified, but... Hmm? Wait a second. What if the era of that ending is ours?

However, the historical record shows that Amelia founded Imperial Ellmeyer as the Maid of the Sacred Sword.

In other words, she never became the queen of Hausel.

Even so, a certain question and theory present themselves.

Why was the demon king born into the imperial family, which is descended from the Maid of the Sacred Sword? Couldn't it have been due to the oath? Technically, Claude should have been defeated by Lilia, lost both his magic and his memories, and become human. If he'd gained Luciel's memories, he would have been able to go to Amelia, who'd chosen to become queen, as the human Luciel. Lilia's main route is limited to Cedric, so there wouldn't be any inconsistencies with Game 4's Queen ending. It would also explain why Luciel still exists as the demon king.

"I came close to being dragged into their promise to be wedded in the future."

Aileen has been lost in thought, but Claude's words bring her back to the present. "Pardon? What did you just say? Be wedded?"

"Listen. I am the demon king, correct?"

"Yes."

"That man and I share the same true form. And so..."

"—So this 'destined lover' business really was about marriage?!"

Claude looks a little troubled, which answers her question.

"Heh, heh-heh-heh... Then that means he was opposed to our marriage simply because I don't have your mother's soul... That's all? A trivial little reason like that?"

A shiver runs through Aileen's shoulders. She starts to get out of bed, but Claude catches her by the waist. "Where are you going?"

"To end him with the sacred sword, for good."

"You can't. And anyway, the true form's in the demon realm."

"Then I'll go to the demon realm and destroy it."

"How are you planning to get there? Besides, I don't think 'Father' is as determined to do this as the true form is."

He pulls her back to the spot she just left, then wraps his arms around her from behind, hugging her. Irrked, Aileen glares up at him. "You're defending your father? ...Or does that woman interest you, Master Claude?"

"You're the only one I love, so don't sulk."

"I'm not sulking! I'm simply confirming the facts..."

"You're the only one."

If he thinks he can silence her by repeating that, he's woefully mistaken. Twisting around in Claude's arms, Aileen grabs him by the shirtfront again. "In that case, why didn't you tell me about this before? ...No, don't say it, I basically know already. You've met this destined woman, the one who has your mother's soul, correct?"

"Aileen, it hurts, and I can't answer—"

"Why do all men do the same thing at times like these...?! So what is this? Will you make her your second consort? In that case, to begin with, tell me the woman's name and address and full date of birth and family pedigree and—"

"You are the only wife I'll have."

"Excuse me?! I won't allow that sort of irresponsible behavior, Master Claude!"

"Why would you say...? I mean it; it really isn't like that. When I met her, it was nothing. The true form shows me dreams, telling me 'This is your wife,' but the only thing that was identical was her face."

She's been choking Claude with his shirt collar, but her hands finally relax. Claude's shoulders slump in relief.

"I was wary. After all, it kept telling me that she was the one I was supposed to wed, not you, over and over. But then I really didn't think anything of her, and the tension went right out of me."

"Is...that right?"

“Yes. It made me think there was no sense in letting you stay uneasy, so I decided to tell you.”

Something about this doesn't sit right with her. She still isn't happy about the fact that he kept quiet about it, or the fact that it was resolved before she knew it.

It must show in her face. Claude is smiling wryly. “Please don't be angry, Aileen. I'm sorry I didn't tell you.”

“You aren't genuinely sorry at all!”

“There's no help for that. You'd do the same thing to me, wouldn't you?”

She has no response for that. She also doesn't feel like forgiving him, though, and she falls silent. Claude still has his arms wrapped around her waist, and he topples over onto the bed, pulling her down with him.

“Just a— Master Claude!”

“It felt as if speaking of it might make it real, and I couldn't stand the idea. As that so-called father of mine says, with all the magic the true form has, any wish it makes is basically a curse. There's no telling what may happen. But you're the one I want.”

If he's going to talk like that, it's hard to stay angry. In the space between Claude and the sheets, Aileen's cheeks flush, not with anger, but with shame.

“Even if I make you cry, I want to be in love with you when I do it.”

“What exactly do you mean by that?!”

“So it really was a relief... And because of that, I'm sleepy...”

Claude goes quiet.

Huh? Aileen blinks. “M-Master Claude?”

“.....”

“Wha—? You can't actually have fallen aslee— Master Claude? Master Claude.” She shakes him, but then she hears him breathing peacefully. Not only that, but his body's completely relaxed, which means he's heavy. Whoever would have thought he'd fall asleep so readily, or so soundly?

They've inadvertently re-created their first night, with their roles reversed. Aileen isn't sleepy yet, and she'd put a little—no, she put quite a lot of effort into preparing for tonight. Even as she'd given up, she hadn't quite abandoned all hope, and yet...

Her husband's sleeping, tranquil face is a balm for the eyes. He shows no sign of waking, so she slips out from beneath him with some difficulty, then sighs. Perhaps this is how it's meant to be.

There are several things she'd like to say, but in Claude's mind, apparently this is a satisfying resolution.

His cheek is smooth and glowing, even though he does nothing in

particular in terms of skin care. She pokes it with her index finger, letting him off with a warning: “I haven’t forgiven you yet. Tomorrow, I will get that woman’s name out of you.”

She has the strong suspicion the name he says will be Grace Dark.

However, if that’s the case, then something tugs at her.

In the game, Amelia and her sister, Grace, had different hair colors, and their features weren’t identical. They were fraternal twins. If the past was true to the game, then Amelia and Grace would have different faces.

Claude’s “destined lover” should have the soul of Amelia Dark, the Maid of the Sacred Sword. Since she is only a reincarnation of her, no doubt both her appearance and her name will be different.

However, if the reincarnation looks just like Grace Dark and even bears her name, it’s far too neat to be written off as coincidence. Not only that, but the current Grace Dark is also identical to the villainess in the game.

Could it be that the villainess and the Maid of the Sacred Sword appear identical to the final boss? But why on earth...? Or did the past differ from the game, and they were identical twins in this world? That would make it hard to tell which of them was the Maid...

However, for now, guarding her husband’s sleep comes first.

“Good night.”

Kissing Claude softly on the temple, Aileen lies down as well. The candles wink out.



Serena always visits Cedric on the same day, at the same time—once a week, in the dead of night, when the rest of the imperial castle is fast asleep. The way to his prison in the West Tower is so deserted, it’s startling.

When did she first realize that it was only like that at this specific time and that her routine was intentionally being overlooked?

She sighs. This path’s sole purpose is to unmask those who are making contact with the second prince. It’s hushed, and she always gets lost in thought.

About the future, for example. Never a good sign.

That second prince really has no intention of becoming emperor anymore, does he...? How long should I keep doing this?

It’s important to know when to quit. Aileen is the next empress, and while Serena isn’t the least bit happy about it, the woman’s camp

currently finds her useful. She has an opportunity to set her future course, and she can't afford to get it wrong.

That said, Aileen is the very person who landed Serena in this situation. Working for her is galling. Even now, she's using Serena just as she pleases, and it's irritating.

Sometimes, out of nowhere, she wonders if this isn't her chance.

Feeling as if one has gone as far as one can is a practical assessment of one's limits, as well as giving up. Snag a man who's in the very middle of the pack, neither the top nor the bottom, and have a decent life—most women laugh and call that happiness. However, the majority of them are just trying to make themselves feel better. If asked whether they would choose the same man if they had money, time, talent, and the right circumstances, there probably isn't a woman out there who'd say yes.

That woman might, though.

The woman she hates most is living the life she most longs for. How ironic. On top of that, the woman's lady-in-waiting might nod and choose her man just the same, too.

Serena reaches up to touch the ends of her hair. It's been trimmed to hang evenly above her shoulders. After chopping it off, she's developed a habit of touching it, as if she's checking to see how long it is.

She didn't technically have to cut it this drastically. Only part of it was cut short; she could have hidden it cleverly until it grew back out. However, a certain annoying idiot profusely apologized to her about it, so she took great satisfaction in hacking it all off right in front of him.

That expression of his...

He looked as if he'd just seen the end of the world, and the memory makes her burst out laughing. If he prefers women with long hair, it serves him right. It seemed to have been a serious shock. Before, Auguste always followed her around, telling her to make friends and asking her if she was staying out of trouble, but lately, he's stopped entirely. He often looks at her as if he wants to say something, but that's it.

When he finally spoke to her the other day, he said, "The weather's very nice today, isn't it?" She gazed at him in stony silence—was that all he had to say to a woman he'd embraced?—and he trudged off dejectedly.

She thought he was the type who could do it if he tried, but apparently she misjudged him. If he thinks she'll go easier on him just because he put in a little effort, he's got another think coming.

There's no way she's going to do as he pleases. Strangely, thinking about Auguste helps her rally her feelings. It reminds her that she

tried to get him to love her, ended up feeling wretched, then gritted her teeth and resolved never to feel that way again.

Take what you want. Don't wait to be chosen. You do the choosing. Choose your future on your own.

"Lady Serena Gilbert."

No one ever calls her by her aristocratic name now, and the sound of it makes her stop.

The candles in the sconces illuminate the depths of the long, stone-floored hall, revealing a woman. It's one of the candidates from the royal exam that has turned Ellmeyer upside down. A survivor who hasn't fallen victim to Aileen's traps.

The girl who's nearest to becoming the next queen of Hausel.

"Lady Grace Dark."

"You know me?"

"—Well, yes. I am a servant employed in the imperial castle. They've told me you are a potential mistress for Prince Claude and that I am to serve you." She gives an inoffensive response.

The woman has come closer, and she narrows her eyes. The shadows are deep, and she can't make out her finer movements, but she senses pity.

"Whoever would have thought a daughter of Count Gilbert would say such a thing...?"

Why does this woman know her background?

Maybe it wouldn't be a very difficult thing to investigate, but the fact that she seems to have done so is unsettling. It wouldn't be strange if she knew about the Ashtart incident that had plunged Mirchetta into chaos...but if she does, then why is she speaking to her?

"No— There's no point in bringing up the past, is there. I have a message for you from Her Majesty."

"From...Her Majesty...the queen of Hausel?"

"Yes. She sees great potential in your power."

No. Instinctively, Serena realizes that the Ashmael incident must be the one this woman investigated. She backs away.

Grace frowns, looking sorrowful. "It's quite natural for you to be wary. We are not your enemies, though. We wish only to invite you to the Queendom."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" The conversation is so ridiculous that she forgets her place as a servant and responds with a question.

The other woman doesn't seem offended. She goes on, "That ability of yours amplifies the power of others. If used correctly, it will ensure a splendid future for everyone. You'll truly deserve the title of 'saint.' If you wish, we can make you a royal candidate as well. Her

Majesty feels that you are quite qualified to be queen.”

“...Qu-queen? You’re joking. I’ve never even been to Hausel.”

“Birthplace and origin are irrelevant. What’s important is to have a heart filled with love for the world.”

“You want to be queen yourself, don’t you? Why would you bring me this offer and create another rival? No matter how you look at it, that’s strange.”

“It isn’t that I want to become queen. Fate is simply making it so.”

Sounds fishy, Serena immediately thinks, but she stays where she is.

“Besides, even if you do not become queen, the queen’s advisers are chosen from among the remaining candidates. If I am crowned queen, I would like to have you as my adviser. That is why I’ve extended this invitation.”

“.....”

“I won’t force you, of course. However...I believe it will become harder for you to live on your own.”

“What do you mean?” she asks. Her voice sounds like her throat is parched.

Grace looks sympathetic. “No doubt throngs of people will seek out your power, even if they have to take it by force. It’s only a matter of time. Worse, if they learn they can achieve the same results with your body fluids alone—I’d rather not say it, but I’m sure you can imagine the sort of things that may happen to you.”

“.....”

“There may also be some who would resort to murder to get rid of you. When that happens, I doubt your current environment will be capable of protecting you. People may also fear you for your ability to magnify the demons’ power and kill you for that. Or...do you have some sort of lingering attachment to this place?”

“An attachment...” She falters, and Grace gently takes her hand. That’s all she does, but somehow, Serena feels as if something has been stolen from her.

“...Oh, I knew it. Your present is incorrect.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Maid of the Sacred Sword should have been taken with you. You should have saved Mirchetta from the cambion’s demons and become the Saint of Salvation.”

She gulps.

“You would have wedded the man who became the Holy Knight, reclaimed the title of Count Gilbert from your uncle’s family, and won happiness.”

That’s nothing less than the ultimate future she once dreamed of.

“It’s all right. There’s still time. For his sake as well, make the

right choice.”

The girl’s violet eyes are filled with conviction. Those eyes can see the future, like Aileen’s and Lilia’s.

Come to think of it, I’d heard that the queen of Hausel can read the future... But this girl’s still just a candidate, isn’t she?

However, choices always come from the most unexpected places. When they do, one has to grab them or they’ll slip away.

Besides, Serena has watched Aileen and Lilia for a while now, and her intuition is telling her that this girl isn’t just a royal candidate.

“...What do you want me to do?”

Grace smiles. There’s familiarity in her expression. “First, let us rescue Lady Sahra from the Kingdom of Ashmael.”

“Sahra? You mean the failed Daughter of God?”

“She isn’t a failure. She is the genuine Daughter of God, but her fate has been twisted. We must guide her toward her proper destiny. Then we’ll slay the demon king.”

The woman’s voice is tranquil, and yet for some reason, sweat breaks out on Serena’s spine. She manages to smile back with just one corner of her mouth, out of sheer stubbornness. “Slay the demon king? Are you planning to go to war with Ellmeyer?”

“Don’t worry. This country will be beyond caring about such things very soon. The demon king will become a demon before long,” the girl says quite casually. “It’s all right. Claude Jean Ellmeyer’s fate is proceeding as it should. The fact that he rejected me is proof. Hee-hee. That’s right. *Not choosing Grace Dark is his true destiny.*”

If she’s talking about the royal exam, that statement seems off. However, her face is twisted in supreme pleasure. “The curse is binding the demon exactly the way it should. When the demon king awakens once more, he’ll understand destiny...at the Foundation Festival, held in celebration of the Maid of the Sacred Sword’s creation of this country.”

The candles flicker, making their shadows overlap and grow darker.

Serena instinctively wants to back away, but the woman is holding her hand and she can’t move.

“Come, let us grasp the correct future. A world in which the hero chosen by the Daughter of God becomes the divine king, your love makes the man who wins your heart a Holy Knight, and the Maid of the Sacred Sword slays the demon king. I’m sure we can do it.”

You won’t be able to go back, that other woman told her, up in the clock tower.

This is the point of no return.

◆ Third Act ◆

Hence, the Villainess Cannot Escape Fate

No sooner do they sit down to breakfast in the old castle than Claude asks, “Why don’t we ever manage to become one?”

Aileen, who is about to unfold her napkin, feels her cheeks tense up under her husband’s serious gaze. “M-Master Claude. That isn’t the sort of topic one discusses at breakfa—”

“Why did I fall asleep? ...Yes, I was sleepy. I was very sleepy. And so I slept. It may be a natural, human thing to do, but it’s just not fair. It’s mean. Don’t tell me this is fate. I won’t acknowledge a fate like this...”

“Make the earthquake stop, Master Claude! No blizzards, either. There’s less than a week until the Foundation Festival! They’ve begun setting up street stalls already!”

The Foundation Festival, which also commemorates the birthday of the Maid of the Sacred Sword, is Imperial Ellmeyer’s biggest event. For three days, stalls will line the streets, distinguished guests will visit from abroad, and events ranging from street performances to a sword-fighting competition will be held. It’s a very profitable time of year for the empire’s citizens. If the next emperor wrecks it by having a tantrum, it won’t be the least bit funny.

“Hausel has told us that they’ll reconsider the royal exam. It appears we’ll be able to relax and focus on the Foundation Festival. This event is an important step on your path to becoming emperor, Master Claude! We must make it a success.”

“Thanks to those Foundation Festival preparations, starting today, we’ll be working almost too much to sleep. You don’t think anything of that?”

“As the crown princess, I will carry out my duties splendidly!”

“So that’s how you’re going to be. I knew it...!” The sight of Aileen’s enthusiasm makes Claude’s shoulders slump. Standing by his elbow, Keith adds lemon and sugar to his tea, as if to console him. While he’s at it, he slathers a generous helping of honey on a scone, one of Claude’s favorite foods. Keith’s spoiling him.

Still, it isn’t raining, and she probably doesn’t need to be solicitous. Thinking she’d better eat quickly and get to work, Aileen picks up her fork. Today’s dessert is cherry pie, a secret favorite of

hers. Just as she's cheerfully preparing to dig in, Rachel deftly confiscates her plate. "Lady Aileen, you'll get fat."

But she already served it to me. What is this...? she thinks, and then Rachel smiles at her. Picking up on wordless pressure from her lady-in-waiting, Aileen clears her throat. "I—I am the crown princess."

"Yes, I'm aware..."

"And so, erm, with regard to my most important duty... Would it be all right to, um, take care of that after...the F-Foundation Festival, when we can relax and take our time?"

As she's speaking, her cheeks flame red, and she averts her face. She can't see Claude. However, from the way the flowers in the vase all bloom at once, she can tell his mood has improved.

"I see— Yes, we'll be slow and thorough."

"I said nothing about being thorough!"

"That settles it. Once the Foundation Festival is over, I won't leave the bedchamber for a week. Keith?"

"Understood, Master Claude. It will make for a murderous schedule. You don't mind?"

"No, I don't."

"Lady Aileen. I'd expect no less of you. Imagine motivating our lord so well."

"N-no, I—"

"Allow me to clear this plate away for you, Lady Aileen."

"L-let's give it our best, Master Claude!"

After Aileen has cut off her own escape route, the cherry pie is set down in front of her again. She's paid a heavy price for it. However, Claude is feeling enthusiastic, and that's for the best. Now at least the weather's sure to be fine.

"In any case, guests from abroad will begin arriving tomorrow. We'll have to prepare to welcome them—"

"That's right. Like us, for example."

A sudden voice breaks into their breakfast conversation, and Aileen freezes up, still holding her fork. Claude only *tsks* in irritation. "So you've struck again, Holy King."

"Don't talk about us as if we're a monster, Demon King. Hey, get us some tea, too. No need for food; we've already eaten."

With that, the king of another nation pulls up a chair to the breakfast table. Like Claude, he can use teleportation magic at will. Rather exasperated, Aileen takes him to task. "A surprise visit, Master Baal? Must you? You're scheduled to arrive with Lady Roxane tomorrow, correct? We have a schedule of our own to follow."

"Oh, we happened to hear of a little morsel during today's court council. So we slipped out."

"You slipped out of a court council to come here? Won't Lady

Roxane be angry with you?"

"Not if she doesn't find out. —On the last day of the Foundation Festival, is there really an event in which men receive lilies from women?"

Aileen looks blank, then nods.

The last day of the Foundation Festival is also the Maid of the Sacred Sword's birthday. Cut lilies, her symbol, are handed out everywhere, and it's the custom for women to wear lily hair pins or pendants as they celebrate.

"Then is it true that receiving a lily means that that man is the one closest to the woman's heart?"

"Yes. When a woman gives a man a lily, the Maid's symbol, it means that she trusts him to protect her. In other words, she's agreeing to be his wife."

In short, it's a declaration that she's becoming an ordinary girl again. Since the Maid of the Sacred Sword became empress, it's questionable whether one can say she became an ordinary girl, but it was probably more ordinary than being the woman who saved the world.

"You mean, if Roxane gives hers to us, it will mean we are closest to her heart." It's obviously a serious question, and Aileen feels even more appalled. He can't have slipped out of a court council because he wanted to ask that, can he?

"Married women don't wear lilies."

"What?! Then what are we supposed to do?!"

"What do you mean, 'what'? Lady Roxane is already your wife."

"Don't say it, Aileen. Pathetically, this man is desperately trying to court his own spouse."

"That's enough out of you, Demon King! Your situation isn't much different!"

"Aileen and I love each other."

The holy king and the demon king glare at each other, sparks flying between them. When magic and holy power clash, literal sparks fill the air. It's quite a terrible nuisance.

"We confess our love like a man, too! It doesn't quite seem to have gotten through to her, though! On top of that, Roxane has begun pushing us to conceive an heir! She says if she won't do, then we need to hurry and find someone else... And here we...we...we feel it wouldn't be good to force her, so we've been toughing it out by simply sharing a bed with her every night..."

"You mean you're literally just sleeping in the same bed?"

"What are we supposed to do? If we made a move now, we'd have to give up on everything!"

"...On that point alone, I can respect you."

“You get it? That’s right, yes, that’s right...!”

On top of that, now they’re suddenly commiserating. Aileen really doesn’t understand men.

“By the way, we heard something about you and the royal exam—Hey, that earring we gave you is damaged.”

Aileen, who’s been enjoying the cherry pie as if this had nothing to do with her, looks up.

Claude touches his earring, then grimaces. “Right... It must be because I was annoyed you’d stopped by, so I used magic.”

“Listen, you, the holy king himself imbued that with power. Treat it a little better, would you? Give it here.”

Claude quietly holds out the earring. Baal repairs it neatly, then hands it back. From the look of things, they actually get along pretty well. Aileen sighs wearily, then turns to Baal with a question. “And? Since you are here, will you be staying, Master Baal? Is Lady Roxane going to journey here by herself?”

“We told you we’d slipped out of a court council. We’ll return and leave properly tomorrow, with Roxane. We’ll be using teleportation magic anyway. However, if we don’t pay an official visit, Roxane will be angry—”

Abruptly, Baal glances at his left hand and turns pale. The golden band on his ring finger has begun to glow a telling red color. “She’s... found us out? ...It can’t be! At this hour, she should still be playing with the Holy Dragon Consort!”

“What is that?”

“Roxane has a matching ring. Like that earring, they’re set with sacred stones, and we’ve made it so she can contact us if anything happens...”

In other words, Roxane is calling him. As Baal freezes up, his eyes on the ring, Aileen feels rather tired by all this. “Shouldn’t you answer? It’s from Lady Roxane, isn’t it?”

“B-but... Where will we sleep tonight?! Don’t tell us we’ll be sleeping alone! Or will the Holy Dragon Consort be joining us again?!”

“I couldn’t say. In any case, answer that; fleeing will only make the situation worse.”

At that cold warning, Baal touches his ring. He seems close to tears. Clearing his throat, he opens with an excuse. “Uh, um...Roxane. Listen, we definitely weren’t skipping work... What?”

Baal has been wearing the timid expression of a man gauging his wife’s mood, but a sudden change comes over him. “Sahra’s been taken?! Impossible— By whom?!”

Aileen, who’s raising a fresh cup of tea to her lips, freezes mid-motion.



The corridor is strewn with mud and trash. Her own sandals are in the middle of the mess.

Sahra is barefoot, and she stops, unable to go any farther. She's carrying a basket of fruit for the water dragon's breakfast. Hugging it to herself tightly, she starts to turn, intending to look for another route— And just then, someone shoves her back.

"Gracious, Lady Sahra, I'm so sorry."

".....It's quite all right."

"Oh no! You aren't hurt, are you? But you'll be fine, won't you. You're the Daughter of God, after all. Surely you can heal yourself."

"If we tried to help, I'm sure we'd only get in the way. We'll be going now."

Tee-hee, tee-hee. She can't be bothered to remember the face of every single harem maid who laughs at her. She just becomes one with the mud in the filthy corridor and waits for it to be over.

When she can't hear their laughter anymore, she tries to get up. At that point, she finally registers that she's skinned her knee. Her palms are also scraped and red.

She most certainly can heal herself. After all, Sahra is the Daughter of God.

A Daughter of God who has been forgiven by the holy king and the deeply merciful principal consort, even though she was useless in their hour of need. One who now lives quietly, praying for the recovery of her husband, the holy general.

A wretch who deceived everyone. A coward who ran because she didn't want to die.

"What are you doing?"

She didn't hear the figure approach, and she flinches. When she sees who it is, though, the tension leaves her. "Miss Roxa... Lady Roxane."

"Get up."

Obedying the dignified voice, she climbs unsteadily to her feet. Roxane brushes the rubbish from Sahra's hair and clothes, then retrieves her muddy sandals for her. She doesn't balk at the fact that her beautiful pomegranate red robes will be soiled.

"The Holy Dragon Consort has finished her meal."

"What...? B-but they said she hadn't begun yet."

"No doubt they told you the wrong time on purpose. That sort of thing is common. They frequently did it to me as well," Roxane says

casually. "You're hurt. Let's get that treated."

"I...I can heal it myself, so—"

"You mustn't heal wounds like that on your own. Come with me."

"B-but the hall is dirty..."

"You mustn't trouble yourself about that, either. Everything can be washed later." With that, Roxane sets off through the mud.

This woman never changes, no matter what Sahra's circumstances are.

Sahra bites her lip, then sticks a bare foot into the mud. A slimy, nauseating sensation spreads across her sole, but she tells herself she mustn't care.

When they reach the Sun Palace, the maids pale at the sight of Roxane's soiled clothes. Calmly, Roxane orders them to bring hot water and fresh clothes for Sahra, then spreads salve on Sahra's scraped knee herself.

"The maids you saw earlier work in General Ares's mansion. As his wife, you must supervise them properly."

As Roxane applies the ointment, a ring gleams on her left hand.

"...You and Master Baal have matching rings."

At Sahra's remark, Roxane looks up. As always, it isn't possible to tell what she's thinking from her expression. Her face is lovely, but cold. That's what most people say. Sahra is sure she's kind, though. She's hard on Sahra and constantly scolds her, but Sahra's to blame for that as well. She said so herself, defending her, and yet... "At the banquet the other day...I saw Master Baal sleep with his head on your lap. You've grown close, haven't you...? I'm glad. Lady Roxane, because of me, you almost—"

"'Miss' will do. That's how you addressed me before."

"No, it won't... Or so I've been told. Everyone says different things... Miss Roxane? Was I wrong? Did I need to die?"

Her friends have turned on her and begun to harass her. Eyes abruptly grew cold once she was no longer the Daughter of God. The kingdom had tried to force her to fight the fiend dragon. In order to protect things like that, should she have...?

"Everyone was kind before. A-and so, I thought I'd do all I could... But why did they tell me—only me—to go die, and then blame me for running away?! There were crowds of people who didn't fight or do anything at all. Why was I the only one who wasn't allowed to run away?!"

Sahra's shoulders are heaving, and she grits her teeth. If she cries, they'll only sneer at her. She's learned that all too well over the past month, so why is she still incapable of accepting reality?

It has to be because she's stupid. Because she's a slave who can't even read or write properly. In that case, why would they rely on her,

then get mad because she didn't save them?

"I must apologize to you. It's about General Ares."

Sahra flinches. That's her husband's name. However, as she is now, she isn't able to accept it.

"General Ares believed in you mindlessly, fawning over you more than he needed to, and I was unable to stop him. Looking back, Master Baal was my blunder as well. If I had ensnared him at once, things would never have become so awful."

"E-ensnared..." She wasn't expecting that word, and the surge of emotion that's been building inside her loses its momentum.

"Listen to me. Your error was being oblivious to the fact that General Ares was looking at you but seeing a dream."

Bewilderment wins out, and she doesn't know how to respond.

"Lady Aileen said so as well: Men who lose themselves in love are fools."

"Huh...? Um..."

"I must also take care. Master Baal is a splendid person, but I feel as if he is also seeing a dream in me. I am not a terribly charming woman, and yet he keeps telling me that I am adorable, as if it's the only word he knows."

Boasting about your lover? Sahra thinks on reflex, but Roxane's sigh is a serious one. "In spite of that, the moment the dream crumbles, men pin the blame on the woman."

Probably so, she thinks. Ares is sure to be disappointed in her.

"And so when you ran, it wasn't a mistake. Nothing of the sort."

She feels as if she's been told she doesn't have to die. For the first time, someone's said they're glad she survived.

A moan escapes her. Sobbing convulsively, she breathes out, then in. Finally, she feels as if she can process a reality in which such things happen to her inexplicably— As long as it's all right for her to live.

Coolly, Roxane holds out a handkerchief. Her attitude hasn't changed at all.

This woman is the only one who hasn't changed.

"However, even if you weren't aware of it, you raised others' expectations excessively. This is the penalty. You do understand that, don't you?"

Since that's so, she can agree with those stern words as well.

"From now on, first and foremost, do what you're able to do. That said, you are the Daughter of God. We can't send you to live in town with the common people, and we aren't able to recognize your divorce from General Ares right away. If we were to return you to the harem someday, then it might be possible, but—"

"N-no! That's...all right."

After turning her down, she feels just a little proud of herself.

Roxane tilts her head, perplexed. "I'm sure you have no love left for General Ares. As long as you do your best for the kingdom, Master Baal will take good care of you."

"I did ask him to let me return to the harem once. However, Master Baal said he couldn't do that. He told me I wouldn't do. He also said...that it wouldn't be fair to you, Miss Roxane."

When Baal had visited Sahra to inform her of her punishment, he'd told her things couldn't go back to the way they were. At the time, she'd pressed him to explain why. At this point, she understands Baal's kindness in not asking her to serve as a wife of the holy king.

"...Master Baal is a wonderful husband, isn't he?"

Roxane begins to say something, then stops. Her expression is complicated. Softly, she murmurs, "...No doubt General Ares was not born evil, either."

"That's...true. He did say he liked me. Up until a little while ago, I wasn't able to control my power well. Sometimes I'd make wounds far worse instead of healing them, and so people called me a monster and sold me off to others, again and again... But Ares told me that my power was a kind one."

"Are you sure he wasn't simply trying to make himself look good, without really meaning anything by it?"

That scathing remark makes Sahra smile wryly. "Possibly. I do think he meant it at the time, though. He told me I wasn't meant to be used. I was a girl who should be protected. No one had even tried to protect me before..."

Back then, the passion in his eyes had been genuine.

And yet...where had they gone wrong?

"Once I took Ares's hand, I was hailed as the Daughter of God, and everyone treasured me. I was happy. After all, more than I wanted to save anyone, I wanted to be protected."

"...That rather disqualifies you as the Daughter of God, doesn't it?"

"It...really does. I think so, too. What made me the happiest about marrying Ares was that he would protect me. That was why when people from the Queendom of Hausel began making frequent visits to the mansion and Ares talked of power more and more, I did nothing. I didn't want him to hate me, and the fact that everyone cherished me made me happy."

"....."

"What is Ares doing now? ...I've been told he's sick, but it isn't true, is it?"

She never wanted to see him again. Even now, Sahra is afraid he'll yell at her and call her a traitor. However, she's finally able to see that

they both treated the other as disposable.

"There's no need for you to concern yourself with that. Even if you met him, I don't believe he would be capable of speech."

She blinks at Roxane, and the woman continues impassively, "Whoever told you he was sick wasn't lying. In order to control the fiend dragon, General Ares used demon snuff. He's addicted to it."

"...What?"

"Ellmeyer has an experimental drug that alleviates the symptoms of demon snuff addiction. They've shared it with us, but I'm told his condition isn't promising. He seems to have swallowed something when he was captured, and its effects made the symptoms of his addiction worsen rapidly. I doubt he'll last much longer."

A chill begins at her core and spreads through her whole body. Sahra just assumed he was in a prison cell, resentful and angry. She's always like this. She gets tripped up by imaginary fears and runs away from reality.

"L-let me see him, please."

"What good would it do? Will you heal him? As the Daughter of God?"

"I—I don't know about that, but—!"

"Think," Roxane says sternly. Sahra sits up straighter, just as she did before she became Ares's wife, before people began calling her the Daughter of God. "There is time. Not much of it, but some... So think, Daughter of God. Don't let anyone use you this time."

Softly, she squeezes her hand into a fist. Roxane places her own hand over it. Their eyes meet. "Wh-why do you still call me the Daughter of God?"

"Because you're still trying to save General Ares. I think that is what a true Daughter of God would do. After all, I have no desire to save that man," Roxane declares heartlessly.

For some reason, this strikes Sahra as funny, and she begins to smile through her tears. "True... But I wonder if I shouldn't have protected Ares, the way he tried to protect me at first. Even if he was the only one..."

All she's done is take. Even if he was blinded by greed after a point, the only real thing he did was protect Sahra, and not only did she fail to repay him, she ran away at the crucial moment.

This even though she didn't once try to reproach her husband for his error.

"If we were to start over, we might start there."

"You're quite eccentric."

"Well, I am the Daughter of God." When she says that, for the first time, she feels as if that is who she really should be.

Roxane sighs. "...You'll need Master Baal's permission to see

General Ares. Whatever he may say, Master Baal is kind to you, so no doubt it will not take too much coaxing to obtain that permission.”

“I-in that case...!”

“I am against it, however. As a result, I imagine Master Baal will squander his brilliance on an effort to persuade me. However, I’m not fond of the idea of Master Baal busily running about for your sake, so no matter what he says, I won’t allow it. I’ll tell him sarcastically, ‘You really are kind to Lady Sahra, aren’t you?’ If he then responds in his usual way and asks me if I’m jealous, I will go straight back to my parents... Perhaps I should start preparing for it now. I’ll begin packing right away.”

“N-no, you mustn’t! I understand. I need to persuade you myself, Miss Roxane!”

“That’s right.”

The agreement relieves her. Then Sahra thinks, almost certainly for the first time, “Um...I would like to, well, I would like to persuade Ares.”

“Persuade him with regard to what, and how?”

“I’ll tell him, ‘Let’s support Miss Roxane and Master Baal!’ I’ll say he was very dashing as the general who defended the holy king.”

Roxane’s eyes widen. Then she puts a hand to her forehead, sighing deeply. “...I doubt that would be enough, after he actively began an insurrection. At the same time, I also suspect that it would, and I’m a bit... I really don’t do well with you.”

“Huh, really? Um, when we talk like this, it makes me think this might be what it’s like to have a big sister...”

“If I had a little sister as clumsy as you, I swear on my dignity that I would reeducate her!” Roxane shouts, slapping a hand down on the table.

Sahra hastily sits up straighter. “By all means, please do!”

“Why would you respond with that? Listen, I refuse to let you meet with General Ares for a pathetic reason like the one you just gave. Keep it in mind.”

“All right, I’ll keep thinking. Um, may I come here tomorrow as well?”

“You know you can’t visit the palace of the principal consort that easily. Why are you so... No, never mind, I’ll go to you. I’d like to get a look at the servants in General Ares’s mansion as well.”

“I’ll clean house and wait for you!”

“Why would the mistress of the mansion be cleaning it?”

“Because no one else will.”

Covering her face with one hand, Roxane sighs. Sahra realizes she’s probably said something strange. “Enough. Very well, we’ll meet tomorrow. And you must not fail to greet the Holy Dragon Consort, no

matter what.”

“I know...” The dragon bares her fangs at the mere sight of Sahra, and thinking of her casts a shadow over her mood. Ares imprisoned the fiend dragon—or rather, the water dragon—and so she hates his wife, Sahra, as well. Even if they don’t know why, everyone knows that the Daughter of God is being rejected.

However, this kingdom relies on the dragon for its water, which means that letting that dragon continue to hate her is an extremely bad move. The water dragon, whom Baal has named “Mana,” is also the Holy Dragon Consort, the noblest lady in the land. Apologizing to her is the one and only daily task that Baal assigned Sahra.

“Give it your best. If you can win the Holy Dragon Consort’s forgiveness, everyone should begin to treat you with a bit more kindness. That includes General Ares.”

“...Huh? Wait, is that why he...?”

“Why do you think he did it?”

“I assumed he was telling me to go apologize because I’d done something bad.”

Roxane falls silent, then sighs again. “It’s quite right and proper that you aren’t calculating, but you really should think a bit more before you act.”

“Uh... Yes. I’ll try...”

“Good. Now then, go. Lady Sahra is returning home. Someone see her—”

A loud clang echoes from the door. Then they hear odd, slithering footsteps, as though someone is dragging their feet.

Except for those noises, it’s terribly quiet. Almost as if no one else is there— With a gasp, Sahra raises her violet eyes. “A barrier...? Why?”

“Isn’t it Master Baal’s?”

“No, it belongs to someone else. W-we’ve been shut in!”

She grabs Roxane’s arm, and Roxane looks at her left ring finger. The next moment, there’s a *snap*, and light flares from the ring.

“It seems I’m...unable to contact Master Baal.”

Even Sahra can see that the ring has been imbued with Master Baal’s power. The fact that it’s been blocked means that their enemy has power that is equal to, or even greater than, the holy king’s.

If the world holds any such person, it’s either the Daughter of God, or the Maid of the Sacred Sword— And more important, what could possibly be making that dragging noise, the one that’s slowly coming closer?

“Sahra.”

The door opens. Without realizing she’s doing it, Sahra has huddled close to Roxane, and the other woman puts an arm around

her shoulders.

They're looking at the tragically changed figure of her husband.

"Are you...there? My Daughter of God."

Ares's eyes are unfocused, and he reaches out into empty space. She can tell he can't see. He doesn't seem able to move well, either; he's dragging his left leg, moving along the wall by feel. "Where are you? Answer, me...Sahra."

".....!"

Roxane puts a hand over her mouth. At the same time, moving slowly to keep from making any noise, she looks at the door, avoiding Ares.

"We can...get away from here. Let's both flee. Together."

"....."

"We'll start over. Please, don't leave me. You're there, aren't you? Heal me. I know...you can do it. We'll run from here— No, that's not it."

"You mustn't answer," Roxane whispers in her ear. She swallows hard, tries to nod—and then she sees it. The single tear that trickles from Ares's sightless eye.

"Please leave me."

She stops in her tracks. Roxane has turned around, too.

"Answer...don't answer me. You mustn't. Save me, don't save me. I'm sorry. As if there's anything to be sorry for...I'm...right. If I lose, that's fine. Kill me. Daughter of God. You are my wife. You've become the Daughter of God. I'll make you principal consort. Not you, Roxane. She's the one who's worthy of it, the Daughter of God, worthy of me."

Ares is just stringing words together, like a broken doll. A shiver runs through Sahra.

"You are the Daughter of God, so why...can't I become...king?"

Roxane is holding her breath as well, frozen in place.

"Save me, don't save me, don't speak, don't get caught! That alone, that's the one thing you mustn't do. No, that's not it, no more, Sahra, help, let's go together, no, come."

Ares has extended his hand, and he turns and looks at her. Their eyes meet.

"Run, Sahra! Run from me!"

Shoving Roxane away, she runs to Ares, right into his arms. Leaning against the wall Sahra's pushed her into, Roxane screams, "Sahra! Come back... Not again! You're—!"

"I won't betray you!"

Ares's left leg begins to shine. It's a teleportation spell. She's being taken somewhere, but Ares has no such power. As she suspected, she was the one they were after. Clenching her fists, she screams to Roxane again, "Please wait for me! I'll save him, then come back. I'll

persuade him!”

“What are you...?! That man isn’t sane!”

She knows.

She knows, but as she looks into his vague, tear-filled eyes, she smiles. “Thank you for trying to protect me.”

Now it’s her turn. She wasn’t able to save the world, she couldn’t risk her life, but she’s sure...

His lips form the words *I’m sorry*, and she knows he isn’t lying.

“Come back! If you both disappear, I won’t be able to shield you —”

“The false bottom in the study drawer. I’m sure Master Baal will be able to open it. Please take care of the rest—”

Do those words reach the other woman before the torrent of light engulfs her?

When the light vanishes, Roxane is in her own palace. It looks the same as always.

“Lady Roxane? I heard a noise... Did you fall?!”

“—It’s nothing. Leave me.”

Biting her lip, she straightens up, steps away from the wall, and dismisses her hesitant servants. Then she takes a deep breath.

The room is silent, as if nothing happened... But that can’t have been a dream.

Clenching her fist, Roxane touches the ring finger of her left hand. *The girl really doesn’t think. Why then, of all times...?*

As Sahra extended her hand toward her husband, with refreshing directness, her profile was worthy of being called the Daughter of God.

“Uh, um...Roxane.”

She has no right to criticize others, though: Just hearing her husband’s voice relieves her. “Could you come to me? Right away, please.”

“Listen, we definitely weren’t skipping work—”

“The Daughter of God has been taken.”

There’s a pause, and then Baal is instantly the king again. Pulled along by it, Roxane becomes the principal consort. Just as Ares made Sahra the Daughter of God.



The old castle doubles as the Oberon Trading Firm's secret headquarters. They own other buildings, but the place everyone gathers in for no particular reason is the conference room at the old castle.

"The Daughter of God's been kidnapped?"

Isaac has arrived a bit ahead of the rest, and when he hears the news from Rachel, he grimaces.

"So where's Aileen?"

"She and King Baal teleported to Ashmael. Prince Claude is at the imperial castle, working."

"She went by herself? I'm surprised the demon king allowed that."

"He says it's for the sake of the week after the Foundation Festival."

What's that supposed to mean? he thinks but opts not to dig too deeply. Whatever he says, the demon king probably trusts the holy king.

Besides, the Daughter of God incident is another nation's problem. It is concerning, but having the next emperor personally stick his nose into it would complicate things. On top of that, the Foundation Festival is just around the corner, and they've only just managed to calm the chaos surrounding the royal exam. He must have a huge backlog of work.

"Okay then, here are the lily ornaments we'll be selling at the Foundation Festival, plus the contract. This one's already underway."

"Yes, I see. They're so tiny... But the lilies are lovely."

Quartz has worked hard alongside the demons to raise these lilies, and they're extraordinarily small. However, that means they can be worn anywhere: as an accent in the hair, pinned to a hat, or as a decoration on the bodice or at the waist.

Wearing a lily at the Foundation Festival is sometimes taken as a sign that the woman is seeking a lover. Many women don't like this and refuse to wear one, so this product is targeted at them. By adding color to the flowers, they've made them accessible to women who can't wear ordinary lilies, expanding their target demographic. They plan to market them by using the angle *When a woman wears a lily that isn't white, she proves she's happy* and try to start a new trend.

People will probably wince at first, but if they put a colored lily on the crown princess, that's all it'll take. He'd like the second prince's fiancée to wear one, too.

"Tell her to pick whatever color lily she likes."

"All right. I'll match it to her dress."

"Also, the lilies for everybody who works in the imperial castle should be delivered around noon today."

"Huh... I-is the Oberon Trading Firm providing those this year?"

Custom dictates that all unmarried women who work at the imperial castle wear lily brooches for the duration of the Foundation Festival. They're supplied on the festival's first day, then reclaimed on the last day, the Maid of the Sacred Sword's birthday. However, if they disappear, they're overlooked as a loss.

Every year, there's a review to determine which manufacturer to purchase the brooches from.

"Just so you know, there were no backroom deals. Also, the design on these is different, so be careful."

"I—I didn't doubt you, but... I—I see. This year is..."

Rachel is oddly flustered. It's contagious, and he falls silent. *Look, giving it to her like this means nothing. Oh, is this that trick I've heard about? The one where you rig it by giving a lily accessory to a woman ahead of time, then have her return it to you on the final day—*

He hasn't caused some weird misunderstanding here, has he? He steals a glance at Rachel's face.

Her cheeks are faintly flushed, and she's gazing happily at the lily brooch Isaac gave her, like a girl in love.

"Oh— I'll return to my duties, then. Excuse me."

Bowing her head to him, Rachel turns to leave. As she runs, her light, pattering footfalls sound merry, and it probably isn't his imagination. She's even left the door standing open.

Isaac squeezes his right wrist, sinking down into a crouch.

"—That was waaaay too close... Good going, Isaac. Way to hang in there. Great job not making a move..."

Didn't she notice that, for a moment, he almost did? If she'd seen it and that was the real reason she ran away, it would be more than a little discouraging.



“No, no way. She didn’t notice. No developments to see here. Great, problem solved.”

“Huh? Isn’t that bad, though?”

The door is still open, and a voice speaks from beyond it. Wordlessly rising to his feet, Isaac hauls the speaker up by his shirtfront. “How long have you been there?!”

“I-I’m sor— It’s fine, I didn’t see a thing! Rachel passed me, and then you crouched down. That’s all I saw, and I didn’t hear anything!”

“Good. Then don’t say anything, and don’t ask questions nobody needs. Just forget about it. If you don’t, I’ll do everything I can to make sure you never marry Serena!”

“Huh...?!” Auguste sounds pathetic. Apparently something has finally dawned on him— Or so James tells him; he was grumbling about it. This guy is straightforward to begin with, and he’s easy to read.

That said, it doesn’t sound as if he’s managed to say anything to the girl in question yet.

“And? Why are you here? What about the Holy Knights?”

When he releases him, Auguste grimaces. “Oh, there was something I wanted to ask James...but you’ll do, Isaac.”

“Make it James.”

“I’d like you to pass this on to him, then. Listen, the girls who work in the imperial castle don’t get to take the last day of the festival off, do they?”

“...Look, guy, checking into little stuff like that makes you sound like a stalker.”

What he’s really thinking slips out, and August looks shocked. “Huh?! Really?! Am I creepy or something?!”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but y’know, it really feels like you’re targeting her, and it’s a turnoff.”

“B-but listen! It’s on your mind, too, isn’t it?! The lily event! They say all the girls who work in the castle are supposed to wear one, so I was, um, wondering what they’d do with them.”

“Just ask her.”

“You know she wouldn’t tell me!” he says emphatically, and Isaac starts to feel a little sorry for him. “Besides, I haven’t managed to catch her today. I think she’s avoiding me. Or maybe I’m just imagining it...”

The guy looks so horribly depressed that it makes him feel like he’s done something bad, so he gives up. “Fine, sorry, I’ll check into it for you. I’m busy today, though, so it’ll have to wait.”

“Huh? Did something happen?”

“Ask James about that later, too. At this point, there’s nothing you

need to do.”

“All right.” Auguste nods obediently. For better or for worse, he seems to be aware of how they normally use him. “I really haven’t seen Serena at all today, though. Maybe she’s doing something for Prince Cedric... I’ll ask Marcus, too.”

“What, you made friends with him? Why? The guy’s a tool.”

“He is pretty uptight, but I talked to him, and he was nice.”

He’s a little appalled: Auguste is so friendly, it’s scary. For the moment, getting to vent a little seems to have made Auguste feel better; he says goodbye and heads back to work.

Is this any time for him to be chasing the girl he likes? Although there’s no telling what she’ll do, so I guess it’s handy that he’s keeping an eye on her.

The Daughter of God has disappeared. If Serena’s gone quiet under those circumstances, it does make him wonder. Coincidences aren’t that common. If he starts getting suspicious of everything that happens, though, he’ll never last. He should act in such a way that it won’t matter what that woman does.

After all, it’s not possible to save everybody. It never is.

Priorities are important. Even more so if Aileen is trying to protect everything. He can’t let himself be the same way—

“Hey. Isaac Lombard?”

As soon as he steps through the demon king’s barrier, someone calls his name... But he doesn’t see anybody. Not only that, but he doesn’t recognize the voice. Isaac looks around, then mutters to himself. “Just my imagination, huh?”

“Over here. It’s me! You’re Isaac Lombard, aren’t you?!”

He hears rustling, and then a bespectacled young man straightens up from the bushes that line the path to the fifth layer. He has tree branches tied to his head, and he’s holding twigs in his hands. In other words—it’s better not to get involved.

“Oh, hey, wait. I’m talking to you. Why are you ignoring me?!”

“You’ve got the wrong guy.”

“You go in and out of the demon king’s old castle like it’s nothing. Saying I’ve got the wrong person is a pretty unlikely story! I’ve been waiting here disguised as shrubbery so that the demon king won’t notice me. If you’re telling the truth, what was it all for?!”

“Uh, actually, who are you?” It’s a serious question.

The weirdo with branches tied to his head staggers. “You... You’re saying you don’t remember me? After we engaged in that magnificent battle of wits?!”

“...Sorry, but seriously, what are you talking about?”

“It was you, wasn’t it! The one who commanded the demons when they kidnapped the demon king!”

Isaac crosses his arms and thinks for a few seconds. He makes deductions from the other man's words: The demon king, kidnapped by demons. Commanding the demons. "...You mean when the demon king lost his memories?"

"Yes, that! That time!"

"So who are you?"

"Do you seriously not remember me?! I'm Lester Craine!"

The name pulls up a vague memory. It's that pampered rich kid, the marquis's son, who'd intentionally had the demon king kidnapped by demons to see if he could still command them even when he had amnesia... Probably.

"I-it is the first time we've met in person, after all. I suppose there's no help for it, technically..."

Isaac can tell that if he says, *I really doubt any of our people remember you*, things are going to get real noisy real fast, so he opts to say nothing.

"While I would really rather not, I have something to discuss with you."

"...Uh-huh. Why me?"

"I checked into some things after that. My plan to force the demon king into exile was perfect, and I wanted to know who had broken it. You're the crown princess's right-hand man, aren't you?"

"Uh, was there a plan there? Besides, you took way too long to check into that. How many months has it been since the demon king had amnesia? We've even cleared up Ashmael's fiend dragon problem since then."

"Says the one who's skillfully hiding his own existence! And what are you talking about?! It was an incredibly effective ploy," Lester says, adjusting his glasses slightly. "If I had known you were the one who handled the crown princess's plots for her, I would've restrained you. However, since I didn't know who you were, there was nothing I could do. Well, I do pick up on things like that."

"I see. Okay, goodbye."

"Would you join forces with me?"

Isaac stops in his tracks, glancing at the other guy. Lester is wearing a smile he can't read. "You're investigating the Queendom of Hausel, aren't you?"

He started doing that right after the incident in Ashmael. It was clear that the Queendom was targeting the Ellmeyer Empire. At this point, there's no telling how the royal exam will affect things, but he figured there wouldn't be any harm in checking them out, and he still has Jasper working on it.

"Let me save you some time. I'll provide you with the information you're after."

“You’re not going to tell me that Grace Dark is the daughter of Hausel’s current queen, right? Because that’s not all that—”

“The daughter of Hausel’s current queen is Lilia Reinoise.”

Isaac looks up, startled. Lester isn’t smiling anymore. “I’ve been investigating independently ever since people began to call Lilia the Maid of the Sacred Sword. I’ve already confirmed it. Not that there’s any proof.”

“You’ve confirmed it, but there’s no proof? What does that mean?”

“Everyone who knows about that time, right down to the midwife, has either gone missing or died suddenly, starting at the beginning of this year. We should assume they’re being silenced. As a result, the only remaining proof is that the daughter of Baron Reinoise is Lilia.”

“Then it would be pointless if she came forward and said she was the queen’s daughter. It won’t be enough to get Lady Lilia out of confinement.”

“Are you playing the fool on purpose? If Lilia is the queen’s true daughter, then what about the woman who’s in Ellmeyer now? Is the rank of queen really what she’s after? What if it’s actually Lilia?”

A substitute daughter. It sounds like the sort of thing that could conceivably happen somewhere, but Isaac’s brain rejects the idea. The children of the queen of Hausel are no different from commoners. There’s nothing to gain from taking their place.

However, Lilia Reinoise does have one thing he can’t overlook.

“Don’t tell me... Does this have to do with the Maid of the Sacred Sword? But Aileen’s got the sword. I can’t think of any reason for substituting somebody else.”

“It’s true that Grace, the royal candidate, may not have a reason. I hear being the daughter of the queen of Hausel means those around you hold you to higher standards, but it doesn’t confer many benefits. It simply brings lots of headaches. However, the queen may have her own reasons.”

“In the first place, why would she get rid of the sort of daughter who’d later become the Maid of the Sacred Sword? There shouldn’t be any reason to do that. She would have brought new power to Hausel.”

“...But Lilia’s the only one who can make the sacred sword.” Information that consisted of totally isolated points in Isaac’s mind begins to form a new picture. “The holy swords Hausel makes are copies of the sacred sword. If they’re satisfied with copies, that’s fine, but I really don’t think they are. After all, they’re still making them. On top of that, they tried to get the fiend dragon to kill Lilia.”

Lester’s right. The Queendom of Hausel requested Aileen and Lilia as envoys. If that was an attempt to get rid of Aileen, then they were undoubtedly trying to get rid of Lilia at the same time.

“If they’ve got a ton of holy swords, they don’t actually need the

sacred sword. Would that be enough of a reason to eliminate it?"

"I believe they felt it was an obstacle, since they're fixated on the holy swords. They could have hundreds of holy swords, but it wouldn't shake the sacred sword's authority. In that case, Lilia and Aileen are inconvenient obstacles; Lilia, because she can form the sacred sword, and Aileen, because she actually controls it."

That does make sense...and has very nasty implications.

"Not only that, but the Queendom of Hausel didn't loan Ashmael a single one of their holy swords. Even though our investigations have shown us that they're not reusable, they do have several thousand of them in storage."

"If they're disposable, it means they aren't complete yet. The holy sword is only a match for the sacred sword if the Daughter of God is around—"

And this morning, the Daughter of God went missing. Serena also repaired the holy sword with a cheat, and he heard from Auguste that she hasn't been seen lately. Isaac gulps.

"In that case, they're covering up the fact that Lilia is the queen of Hausel's daughter because it will sound bad if they end up having to dispose of her for some reason... Or am I overthinking that?"

"No, you're right. Gimme that intel. Let's cooperate. First, you should know that the Daughter of God has disappeared."

"What?! Why didn't you say that sooner—?!"

Isaac grabs the other guy by his shirtfront and puts his face up close. He feels like that's been happening a lot today. "Listen, I'm telling you this because I've chosen to believe you're not a moron. The demon king's magic has been acting up lately. For now, they're using the holy king's power to keep it under control."

"...The crown prince?"

"They say if this keeps up, it won't be strange for him to turn into a demon one of these days."

Luciel has been warning them about it all along. The holy king even showed up at that drinking party specifically to tell them to be careful.

The demon king is bound by an oath. If he doesn't abide by it and unite with his destined lover, his true form will fly into a rage and it may take him over.

All the dots are connected. Lester seems to have realized the same thing.

"Then what Hausel's truly after is... It can't be... Slaying the crown prince—no, the demon king?"

"In an attempt to invest the holy swords with greater authority, yeah. Enough to surpass the sacred sword."

"They'll claim that the royal exam was just coincidentally

happening at the same time and that they were only trying to save Ellmeyer...? But how will they turn the prince into the demon king? Erm, can't he keep himself under control as long as that holy power is active?"

"Search me. They did use the royal exam as a pretense to boldly march in here, though. There's no way they're not going to pull something. I can even guess when—the Foundation Festival."

The birthday of the Maid of the Sacred Sword falls during the Foundation Festival. In the distant past, an army of demons once attacked from the demon realm on the day before her birthday. It would be the perfect day for a thing like this.

Lester spits out his words bitterly. "True, they couldn't ask for a better stage."

"So what can you mobilize, and how far?"

"In three days, I'll raise all the banners of Cedric's entire faction," Lester responds without any hesitation. His eyes are serious. Isaac will have to take him at his word.

"I doubt we've got much time. Hurry. I'll negotiate with Prime Minister d'Autriche."

Lester nods, removes the branches from his head, and takes off at a run. Isaac sighs, mentally switching gears. Then he starts for the imperial castle, walking fast. *First I'll contact James, and then...* He looks up at the castle and starts working out his plan.

He always considers both best-case and worst-case scenarios.

What do we do if the worst happens? What if the demon king turns into a demon and there's no way to turn him back?

"Master Isaac Lombard."

A bell-like voice calls to him. A woman he doesn't know is standing in the dappled light under the trees. Isaac figures out her identity by simply narrowing down the possibilities.

Black hair, violet eyes, and the uniform worn by Hausel's royal candidates...

The woman bows elegantly. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Grace Dark."

Isaac wonders why he's getting flagged down by an awful lot of strangers today. Coincidences aren't that common, though. As if to prove it, Grace tells him why she's stopped him. "Miss Serena would very much like to speak with you."

"...Serena? I think you've got the wrong guy. I don't know anybody by that name."

As Lester pointed out, taking center stage isn't a wise move on his part. It will be more convenient if the woman doesn't know he exists.

Although he feels like he'll owe Auguste an apology, he starts walking right past her without trying to learn anything.

“I see. She did say she wanted to discuss Miss Rachel Danis.”

—He shouldn’t have stopped.

“Her little brother and her parents are well. I hear the brother will begin attending Misha Academy next year. They were very proud of how Miss Rachel had become the crown princess’s lady-in-waiting.”

He shouldn’t have looked, either. He knows this is a bad idea.

“But I know what really happened, you see. Her fate has been warped.”

Maybe she’s right.

Back then, if Aileen hadn’t been reckless and infiltrated the academy dressed as a boy, that girl never would have met either of them. She would have been married off to a fiancé who hit her just to settle a debt.

“Still...it’s probably within the permissible range. I could turn a blind eye to it.”

As if she’s the god who’s in charge of the world or something, the girl casually speaks of fate.

Isaac turns back.

“—Talk to me about what?”

He can’t protect everything. He’s small and insignificant, and fate’s really not something he can fight.



Looking around the sickroom where Ares was confined—or rather, underwent treatment—Aileen sighs.

The spells Baal cast to keep him under surveillance have all been forcibly severed. As Baal picks up the scattered, spent sacred stones, his expression is incredibly stern.

After all, holy power that rivals his own must have been used here. I’m not sure whether even the Maid of the Sacred Sword or the Daughter of God could do that.

The holy king’s barrier is supposed to be practically impervious. Even with the sacred sword, Aileen couldn’t break it without borrowing Serena’s power.

After Ares left the sickroom, he vanished. There’s no telling where he’s gone. Any traces of a teleportation spell have been cleanly erased so they can’t follow him.

At this point, their only hint is the words Sahra left behind. They go straight from the sickroom to the study.

“This is it,” Baal says, peeking into the bottom of a drawer.

Aileen looks inside as well. "It's sealed... Did Lady Sahra do this?"

"Probably. She's right; I doubt anyone but us could meddle with this..."

True to Sahra's words, they've promptly found a false bottom in a drawer in Ares's study.

The room was searched ages ago, but since holy power had been used to disguise it, the hidden compartment was overlooked. No matter how often you opened the bottom, another one appeared. While it seems like a trivial illusion at first glance, it had been cast with great care, and it really isn't possible to see through it. Anyone who opened the false bottom would think, *There's nothing here*, and that would be that. Even if they did manage to see through the illusion, the space below the false bottom is sacred ground, just like the place where the holy sword was sealed. Most would-be interlopers would probably just get lost in there and die.

However, Baal sticks his hand into the space with no hesitation and easily pulls out what's inside. She'd expect nothing less of the holy king.

"A journal? ...That's not Ares's handwriting."

Baal strokes the gold letters sewn onto the red cover. Then he tries to open the locked book. Immediately there's a loud, electrical crackle, and his fingers are knocked away. They're bleeding slightly.

"Master Baal."

"Don't concern yourself. It's sealed... Or is the book itself a cursed item? It may be possible to open it with magic, but..."

"If I may take it back to Ellmeyer, I'll have Master Claude and the mage study it."

"Want me to help?" Abruptly, Luciel appears in midair, upside down.

Startled, Aileen screams. "Father! You still exist?!"

"Ngh... I-I've gotten pretty used to you by now! You can't hurt me!"

"What is this fellow? A human—or perhaps not? Why can you use magic inside our barrier?" Baal looks dubious.

Luciel flips, landing right side up on the floor. "Well, I *am* technically a god."

"A god?"

"Forget that, let's focus on the journal... Well, this is impossible!" All Luciel has done before he makes that declaration is levitate the journal and trace its cover.

Exasperated, Aileen takes the book from him. "Aren't you giving up too quickly for a god? Still, if neither you nor Master Baal can open this, what on earth...?"

No matter how she looks at it, the book is just an old journal. Its

red cover is embroidered in gold, and nothing about the lock looks particularly odd. If she opens it, she has the feeling she'll see ruled pages with a lily crest in their corners—

?! Wait, isn't this the one that showed up on the save screen in Game 4?!

Quickly, Aileen leans in for a closer look, then examines the back cover as well. At that point, she notices something unfamiliar. There are words embroidered in white thread: *This journal will not open until my wish comes true.*

"What? Did you find something?"

"Yes... This. Look at these words."

"It's a vow. The journal really is a cursed item. The issue's more basic than magic or holy power; it's been locked by an intense will... Still, it must have taken a long time to grow this powerful. Centuries, even."

Baal's analysis makes Aileen clutch at her head. "It's the Maid of the Sacred Sword's journal...I believe. Probably..."

"How do you know?"

Because of the save screen, she thinks, but she can't say that. Instead, she shows him the memo that's been roughly pasted to the back cover. "Is this Ares's handwriting?"

"Ah, yes, it reads... 'The truth of the Maid of the Sacred Sword?' How is he so certain when he can't possibly know what's inside?"

"Perhaps he happened to hear something in his dealings with the Queendom of Hausel and stole this, hoping he'd be able to hold it over them?"

Even Ares probably hadn't trusted the Queendom completely. Both parties must have felt as if they were using the other. It wouldn't have been odd for him to keep something on hand as a contingency. In which case, it would make sense for him to ask the Daughter of God to seal it for him.

"...If no one else, General Ares genuinely did trust Lady Sahra, didn't he?"

"Well, yes, probably so. We wouldn't have let him have her if he hadn't."

"Lady Roxane is right over there." When Baal whips around to look at the door, Aileen smiles. "I'm joking."

"You— We thought our heart would stop!"

"I'd avoid careless remarks in the future."

"...Hmm. The Maid of the Sacred Sword's journal?" Luciel, who's been silent this whole time, murmurs. With a jolt, Aileen realizes that the book would have belonged to his wife.

However, Luciel's profile is so cold, it sends a shiver down her spine.

"A vow, huh? There's no telling what she wished for."

"F-Father?"

He smiles back at her, looking exactly like Claude when he's angry. "I've got a little errand to run, so I'll step out for a bit. Tell Claude his dad's going to be away for a while."

"Away? Where are you going?"

"Don't let Claude do anything reckless. Especially not if you call yourself his wife." Rising lightly into the air, Luciel gazes down at Aileen. "Unless you're the woman who can save that boy from fate, I won't acknowledge you. In which case, obeying fate would be better."

Then Luciel winks out of sight...inside the holy king's barrier.

"He really is neither demon nor human. Is he actually a god?" Baal's eyes narrow.

Aileen sighs, nodding. "Yes... The power I took from him with the sacred sword may be returning. Even though he's the sort of father-in-law who runs his fingertip over a windowsill, finds dust, and gets sarcastic about it."

"Wait, you're sure he's a god?"

"For now, I shall return to Ellmeyer. What will you do? The disappearance of the Daughter of God is sure to affect your Foundation Festival visit, isn't it?"

"Oh, we'll have that sort of problem, too, will we? We doubt it will be canceled, though. The one who went missing may have been a holy general, but he is our subordinate. We, the holy king, are just fine."

"Master Baal. Lady Aileen."

A soft voice calls to them from the door, and they both turn. Roxane is standing there, her figure swathed in a long robe.

"Woman, how did you leave the harem? Unaccompanied, at that."

"I asked the Holy Dragon Consort to smuggle me out quietly. It's all right. No one saw us. I thought I should inform you as soon as possible."

Baal is grimacing, but Roxane is a model principal consort. If she's gone out of her way to leave the harem, she must have a very good reason. When their eyes meet, she begins to speak right away. "A messenger has come to invite you to the Queendom of Hausel, Master Baal."

"Right after the Daughter of God's disappearance, hmm? How clever of them." Baal is smiling, but his feelings are probably very mixed. Aileen feels like grinding her teeth as well.

"They may wish to forestall your impending visit to Ellmeyer. At this point, we can divert them by saying you've already departed. What would you like to do?"

Both the holy king and his wife are scheduled to visit during the

Foundation Festival. Roxane has come so that she can teleport there with Baal immediately if necessary.

"They couldn't possibly summon us without a reason. What are they using as bait? Sahra?"

Roxane frowns, lowers her eyes, and answers softly. "...They say that General Ares has come to them requesting asylum and has brought the Daughter of God with him."

"So that's their angle. They may have a queen who can see visions of the past and augur the future in dreams, but even then... The fact that they'd brazenly come out with something this suspicious is impressive."

"I'm terribly sorry. If I'd stopped her..."

Aileen frowns, but before she can say anything, Baal pulls Roxane into his arms. "Enough foolishness. You are the holy king's most favored principal consort. If anything had happened to you, we would have stormed into Hausel by now. There would be war between the holy king and queen."

"You must do no such thing."

"Then you must stay safe. For our sake. All right?"

Roxane hesitates in Baal's arms but gives a small nod. The sight moves Aileen. "Who would have thought that gauche holy king would ever achieve such eloquence...!"

"Hey, we can hear you... Now, what should we actually do? It's a glaringly obvious trap, but ignoring it isn't really—"

"Master Baal. Your ring is shining."

Still holding Roxane in his arms, Baal looks at his left hand. Someone is trying to contact him again. The light is a different color than it was when Roxane contacted him, so no doubt it's someone else.

"From Ellmeyer this time? What a busy day this is turning out to be."

"You have a contact in Ellmeyer as well? Who is it?"

"Oh, a few things happened at that drinking party. We left a sacred item in the old castle."

Drinking party? He can't mean the one held the other day, can he? Before Aileen can ask, Baal touches his ring, and the light vanishes.

"Aileen, got a minute?"

The voice that issues from the ring is Isaac's.

"Has something happened?"

"*Prince Cedric and Lilia Reinoise have gone missing. Come back right now.*"

Without waiting for her to respond, his voice cuts out.

Two disappearances in one day can't be a coincidence. Not only that, but it's the Daughter of God and the Maid of the Sacred Sword. There's definitely something going on.

The Daughter of God incident is another nation's business, but this one involves her own country. Aileen has Baal teleport her back to Ellmeyer's imperial castle earlier than scheduled. Between that and the fact that they can communicate at a distance, the holy king and his sacred items are quite convenient.

I wonder if we couldn't do similar things with demon stones. The majority of those techniques were lost during the Levi Tribe affair, and development has stalled... We'll need to circle back.

However, that will have to wait until after the Foundation Festival is safely over, and Claude has become emperor.

In the West Tower, where the walls and ceiling have been dramatically blasted away, Aileen sighs. Fragments of the iron bars litter the floor. The room's residents—Cedric Jean Ellmeyer and Lilia Reinoise—are nowhere to be seen. There are no corpses, either. Their whereabouts are a mystery, and there's no telling whether they're alive or dead.

The rest of the circumstances match the situation in Ares's sickroom exactly.

The West Tower had been surrounded with both Claude's magic and Elefas's spells. The only ways to escape would be to blow them away with even greater magic, or negate them using holy power. Someone smashed through them using overwhelming magic.

"This was Master Claude's barrier. There can't be many humans, or even demons, who could break it." Elefas, who's accompanying her as a guard, looks grim.

"If this was done with magic, then it wasn't Lady Lilia."

"True. Holy power is one thing, but she can't use magic."

"So they've used holy power to break the holy king's barrier, and magic to break the demon king's barrier. As taunts go, that's quite good... And Master Claude?"

"He's in a meeting. We're keeping the details about Cedric and Lilia quiet for now, but the Foundation Festival is right around the corner..."

"I see. This will drag on for a while, then."

Simply looking for the culprit won't be enough. They'll need to review their security, consider their response to other nations, make adjustments, and handle the situation in the event that the second prince isn't found—There are scores of problems to deal with.

When she steps into the parlor at the back, she finds that it now has a magnificent view of the sky and the forest. Auguste, in his Holy Knights uniform, is picking up furniture fragments. He turns to look at

her.

“Explain the situation to me, Auguste. And also...you, Marcus.”

“We just heard an explosion coming from the West Tower, out of nowhere. Marcus was the first one on the scene. Right, Marcus?”

Marcus works as a guard at the West Tower, a post rumored among the knights to be given to those bound for a quick demotion. His recent trip to Ashmael was a covert one, so his assignment hasn’t changed.

Looking grave, he nods. “Yes. The knights sealed off the vicinity immediately. The only one who visited before the explosion occurred was that woman; she brought their lunch as usual.”

Marcus glances at Serena, who’s leaning back against one of the remaining walls. She shrugs. “I don’t get it, either. After I brought their lunch in, the room just blew up.”

“We could sense magic here, so we called for the Holy Knights, just in case it was a demon...”

“And they sent me to investigate. You showed up right after that, Aileen.”

“All right, you’ve made the situation quite clear. Elefas, what about a barrier to keep people away...?”

“Yes, it’s been cast.”

“Look, can I go already?”

She’s about to respond when she notices Serena is fidgeting with something. Two small, round crystals. She’s playing with them, passing them dexterously through the spaces between her fingers.

Aileen recognizes those crystals.

“.....”

“I mean, there’s no point in my being here.”

“Wait just a little longer. Marcus?”

“Wh-what?”

Startled that she’s spoken to him, Marcus stands at attention. Acting as if she’s approaching him, she whispers to Auguste in passing, “Don’t take your eyes off Serena.”

Auguste’s eyes widen, but as long as his attention stays on the girl, that’s fine. Standing right in front of Marcus, Aileen crosses her arms. “It’s about Lady Lilia and the sacred sword. This is an order from the crown princess: Tell me the truth.”

Marcus blinks at her, then looks put out. “What do you mean, ‘the truth’? You’re the one who—”

“I am the crown princess.”

When she repeats her assertion, Marcus—who’s affiliated with the knights—reluctantly rephrases himself. “...I believe you know more about the situation than I do, Your Highness. I’m told you used your power to destroy the sacred sword she resurrected.”

“But when she resurrected that sword, did she say anything? ‘It’s all thanks to you,’ for example.”

“Oh, that’s— Yes. She did tell me thank you.”

“I see. That settles it, then. Lady Lilia is still hiding a sacred sword.”

The sacred sword Aileen had stolen was from the Cedric route. The one she’d destroyed was from the Lester route. She hasn’t yet seen the sacred sword from the Marcus route.

I did think it was odd. Skipping the sword on the Marcus route and resurrecting the one on the Lester route like that.

Everyone looks at her, shocked. Marcus is particularly anxious. “Look, that can’t be right. In that case, Lilia would’ve never been shut up in a place like—”

“I am the crown princess.”

“I-if that were true, I doubt she’d demurely agree to be held captive.”

“Unfortunately, Marcus, I know that woman better than you do. The reason she hid it is quite simple: Because I am here.” Aileen’s sacred sword is cloaked in Claude’s magic: An ordinary sacred sword is no match for it. “No doubt she assumed she couldn’t win against my sacred sword and opted to lull me into a false sense of security instead. When she wielded the holy sword in Ashmael, its power was abnormal. It rivaled my sword when I’ve borrowed Master Claude’s magic.”

“Isn’t that because Lilia was the one wielding it? As the Maid of the Sacred Sword, she—”

“The holy sword doesn’t care who wields it. No doubt it was so powerful because she was discreetly adding the sacred sword’s power to it. In the end, the holy sword couldn’t endure it and broke. In any case, my point is simple: She is, for good or ill, a dangerous character. I wouldn’t advise abducting her and thinking you can do as you please with her, Serena.”

The conversation has abruptly turned to her, and Serena looks up. “Where did that come from? Why am I suddenly involved?”

“There aren’t many who could break the holy king and demon king’s barriers. However, there is one easy way to do it: by using you, Serena.”

The girl doesn’t so much as flinch. She’d expect no less of her. She feels sorrier for Auguste, who looks shaken. “A-Ailey, what are you say—”

“After all, you revived the holy sword when it was on the verge of breaking. It would be simple for you to add enough power to a magic, sacred, or divine item to make it capable of breaking through the holy king or demon king’s power, wouldn’t it?”

Serena's hand closes around the crystals. The fact that there are new cuts on her fingertips doesn't escape Aileen. "Got proof?"

"Those are from the Queendom of Hausel, aren't they? The crystals you're holding."

They're an item from the game: a divine item that the heroine of Game 4 uses to trap demons during the royal exam. To avoid killing the demons, she uses holy power to seal them inside the crystals before returning them to the demon realm.

In the game, they were used only to capture demons, but the crystals are divine items made with both sacred and demon stones. They can probably be used to trap humans as well.

"Lady Lilia and Prince Cedric are in those, aren't they?"

"....."

"Give them to me, and tell us what it is you've been asked to do. If you do, I'll overlook this."

"Serena," Auguste calls anxiously.

Serena looks at the crystals in her palm and smiles. "That's you all over. You saw through it right away. Both you and that woman."

"Lady Lilia said something, then?"

"...I didn't see this coming. You have my compliments."

Serena lets the crystals fall from her hand. As she watches with narrowed eyes, wondering what she's going to do, the girl swings a blade down at the crystals—the holy sword she saw in Ashmael.

"You're both too easy, though."

".....!" Launching herself off the floor, she shoves the sacred sword between the crystals and the other girl's blade. "Wherever did you get the holy sword?!"

"I bet you know that, too, don't you?"

Even the sacred sword can't easily break the blade Serena brings down. Tsking in annoyance, Aileen cloaks the sacred sword in magic. As their blades clash, the holy sword cracks, and Serena leaps back, putting distance between them. Aileen takes that opportunity to scoop up the crystals.

She squeezes them, channeling holy power into her hand, and the crystal instantly evaporates. A white mist lingers, the remnants of the holy power. Out of it step Cedric, who looks dizzy, and a nonchalant Lilia. At a glance, they appear to be unharmed.

"Just as I expected, Lady Aileen! What a dashing rescue. You made my heart race."

"Elefas, make sure those two are bound properly! And then—"

"Serena!"

With no hesitation, Serena flings herself beyond the demolished wall. Auguste promptly leaps after her, and Aileen launches herself in pursuit. Falling backward, she shouts up to Elefas, "Whatever you do,

you mustn't let that woman near Master Claude! She has the holy sword!"

"Hey, Aileen!"

No matter how many times she reminds her childhood friend to address her with the proper etiquette as the crown princess, he never remembers. Narrowing her eyes, she yells at him, "Protect Lady Lilia and Master Cedric!"

".....!"

She has the feeling he answered, but she can't hear it. Landing on her feet in the brush, Aileen turns to go after Serena—and her eyes fly open.

Serena is standing right in front of her.

"Like I said, you're too easy. It's not Lady Lilia I'm after. It's you."

".....!"

"Ailey! Serena, don't!"

A net of melted crystal spreads out in front of her like water. In the next moment, it swallows her up.

He's not that great at thinking. He's a follower, not a leader.

However, this time, he can't help but think *Why?*

"Serena! Wait!"

The woman is running through the forest with inhuman speed, and she doesn't look back. Is she using demon snuff or something? Or is it a sacred item, or a divine one—

Why?

Auguste grinds his teeth.

She hasn't been an ally. However, she isn't likely to defect to the enemy. That's the sort of relationship he thought they'd built anyway. Was he the only one? Or was there some sort of reason behind this?

No, forget about that, Ailey's— For now, just catch her!

Auguste sucks in one big breath. It may not be a proper thing for a Holy Knight to have, but his sword has been imbued with James's magic. If he uses that, he can move in ways that aren't human.

A brief tap on the soles of his feet—that's all it takes, and he speeds up dramatically. He catches up to Serena, then slips in front of her, turning and pointing his sword at her throat in the same motion. "That's far enough, Serena!"

Serena has thrust her cracked holy sword right at him. He dodges, knocking her blade away. It's already broken, so it doesn't have much more power than an ordinary sword.

"Seriously, stop! You know you can't use that thing anymore! Just behave and let me catch you!"

"You must be joking."

“Why, Serena?!” He catches the wrist of her sword arm and yells right in her face, “Why are you doing this?!”

“Why”? When exactly did I become your—Lady Aileen’s ally, hmm?”

Serena twists her wrist and her torso, lashing out with a kick. Slipping out of Auguste’s hold, she laughs.

Argh, I hate this, Auguste thinks. “If you’ve got a reason, I’ll hear you out, all right?!”

“A reason? I just lost my reason for going along with you people, that’s all.”

“There has to be one! Come on; give me something.” He hates that he’s pleading with her. He hates that he wants to believe there’s a reason. As things stand, he can’t swing his sword at her. “Please, Sere—!”

He’s been so focused on what’s in front of him that he didn’t notice the presence behind him.

Looking down at the sword that’s sprouted from his stomach, Auguste’s eyes widen in surprise. Even Serena is staring.

Even as he crumples to the ground, a smile finds its way onto his lips. Why is she startled if she’s an enemy? Does thinking that way make him too naive?

The warmth is fading from his fingers. He reaches out desperately, and his hand finds someone else’s. Whose?

“Sere...na... I’ll make a...success of myse... So...”

So please choose me.

No, there’s something he has to tell her first.

He has to tell her he loves her. To apologize, because he can’t be her friend anymore, and then—

His thoughts are interrupted by a whisper. A seriously convenient hallucination: “I’ll be waiting.”

As if breathing life back into his stuttering heart, something soft presses against his lips.

Then his thoughts slip away.

Someone’s used magic. Claude, who’s in a meeting, looks up suddenly...

Aileen?

The moment he thinks it, the demons begin to move. The closest is—Almond.

“Prince Claude, here.”

“...Right.”

As he touches the document that’s held out to him, his fingertips tingle, pulling his attention back to the present.

Just now—did something repel my magic?

The hardheaded bunch is droning on and on in a debate whose only purpose is to prolong the meeting. Letting the noise go in one ear and out the other, Claude slowly touches the odd document.

Words.

When he traces them with magic, the rest burns up and vanishes, but the parts that repel his magic remain. Apparently the paper has been infused with holy power.

The words left on the table read: *The crown princess is in our hands.*

Aileen.

If you value her life, wed Grace Dark before the Foundation Festival is over.

His hand closes into a fist. Just then, the door of the conference room opens. The individual who enters is a girl with black hair and violet eyes. A face and coloring that match his destiny.

“Hey! What is the meaning of this? We’re conducting a meeting —”

“Stop, she’s a royal candidate.”

A sudden stir runs through the aristocrats. Ignoring them, Grace approaches elegantly. “Prince Claude. I’ve come because I thought you might need to speak with me soon.”

“...Yes, you’re right.”

Checking his two guards before they step in front of him, Claude rises to his feet. “So now you are queen, then?”

“Gracious, no. You haven’t given me an answer yet, Prince Claude.”

This is what makes human women so frightening.

He puts on a smile that holds as little emotion as possible. He’s sure it’s terrifyingly beautiful. Even the weather freezes up, falling still.

“Would you marry me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Prince Claude...,” his guards begin, but he checks them with a gesture.

“And now everything’s going according to your plan?”

“Perish the thought. This is fate,” the woman answers brazenly. Then she smiles.

There’s no longer a trace of girlishness in her face.

◆ Fourth Act ◆

And the Villainess's Fate Is Her Own Fault

Being sealed inside a crystal is like being underwater. Water that's possible to breathe in. However, she can't see through its shifting surface clearly; she can't hear, and her voice doesn't reach anyone. Even if she tries to speak, it only turns into bubbles that rise toward the surface, while she sinks ever deeper.

I have plenty of Master Claude's magic left. I can escape. But...

Her interest has turned to the question of where she's being taken.

The vibrations may be the only link to reality in this place, but the swaying motion tells her she's being carried.

It would be a great help if they didn't go too far from Ellmeyer.

After all, Aileen can't use teleportation magic. All the sacred sword can do is slay demons. Her orientation is the opposite of the holy king and the Daughter of God. In a place where magic works, she can summon a demon and have Claude come to fetch her immediately, but if that isn't the case, simply being far away will make it difficult to return home.

However, taking her to a place where magic doesn't work would be common sense.

At last, the swaying stops. She waits quietly for a little while, but there's no sign of movement. Since the vibrations have stopped, the surface of the water has calmed, and she strains her eyes, trying to see through it. She can't make out any human figures. On the other hand, she does see a lot of objects. Is this a storeroom?

Deciding that now is her chance, Aileen focuses her mind. Then she realizes that—as expected—she can't use magic.

She has a good idea of where she is now, but she mentally switches gears. What she should be using is the sacred sword.

In the end, neither sacred nor divine items can withstand the overwhelming power of the sacred sword.

She visualizes vaporizing everything around her. She suddenly feels lighter, and her vision opens up. Aileen exhales.

As she anticipated, she's emerged in an unused room. It's a storeroom somewhere. In fact...

“Goodness, it's the treasure room from that still image in Game 4... They've taken this so far that it's actually funny.”

In other words, this is the stage of Game 4: the Queendom of Hausel. It isn't, however, the academic city. The fact that she can't use magic probably means that she's in the royal palace, which is protected by a barrier of sacred stones.

On top of that, this treasure room is the site of an event early in the game. When the heroine is granted an audience with the queen as a royal candidate, someone bullies her by shutting her in here.

She breathes in, then out. This treasure room has become a junk room, so it's dusty. Still the same, more than six hundred years later... Isn't that letting inertia have its way to an excessive degree?

In any case, whoever has attempted to kidnap her is associated with the Queendom. That much is clear.

However, she doesn't intend to leave things there.

There's a very strong sense of Game 4 about all this, but if they've tossed me in here, they can't know much about the game itself. After all, this treasure room has a secret.

By accident, the imprisoned heroine finds a certain hidden passage in the treasure room, one that leads to the queen's private chambers. That is where the heroine first comes face-to-face with the queen, her own mother.

Turning so that her back is to the door, Aileen feels along a promising section of wall. Just as the heroine did, her fingers find words. When she gently channels holy power into them, the letters gleam with light. The wall buckles inward, then vanishes.

Whether or not one is able to pass through without being led astray depends on the strength of their holy power. Some may say her sacred sword is half formed, but she already proved that was no obstacle in Ashmael. In any case, during this event, the heroine hadn't acquired the sacred sword yet.

Even so, it's been over six centuries since then. There's no guarantee that everything will be the same.

Deciding to proceed with caution, Aileen slowly steps forward—and then the true weight of all those years passing makes itself known. The floor suddenly drops out from under her, and she falls.

A trap?! Sacred sword!

Using the sword to create a platform beneath her feet, she regains her balance. When she strains her eyes, she sees holy power glowing like smoldering coals, forming a path. As in the game, it's showing the route to the exit. However, it looks as if traps have been set along the way.

“Well, I suppose they wouldn't just leave it like that for centuries.”

She sighs. Then, with a violent noise like a landslide, she hears something coming. Bracing herself, she stares wide-eyed at what's barreling down on her. The figure that's sprinting toward her hell-for-

leather is...

“F-Father?!”

Things have gotten so busy, James would even take help from a cat. Getting help from a demon instead, James checks his pocket watch. He can probably steal about ten minutes. Besides, the other person should be sleeping in a room that’s just around the bend in the corridor.

He knocks once, not expecting a response, then pushes the door open, only to see the room’s occupant sitting up in bed.

He stares, startled, then grimaces. “Auguste. Is it all right for you to be up?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry; I didn’t mean to worry you.”

Auguste was discovered in the tall grass yesterday, lying unconscious in a pool of blood. The demons who carried him back to the old castle were all worked up over the fact that he might die. Calming them down was a lot of work. According to them, when they brought Auguste in, he had a hole in his stomach.

However, he was actually just covered in blood and unconscious, and suffering only from anemia. That was Luc’s diagnosis, after he’d looked him over in the laboratory-slash-clinic he’d set up in the old castle. It’s a disgrace that he’s in this state when the crown princess was snatched right in front of him.

Pulling a wooden chair over to the bed, James sits down. The autumn wind blows in through the window.

“...And Ailey? Did you find her?”

“No. Prince Claude has issued a gag order regarding the incident, though. We’re not to do anything reckless.”

“And Serena?”

Auguste’s tone is so urgent, it makes James suspect this is what he actually wants to ask.

“She got away. We haven’t found her yet. She must have a powerful backer.”

“I see...”

“We won’t let her escape next time, though. Walt and Kyle aren’t going to take this lying down.”

Auguste tries to raise his head, then promptly looks down. He presses his palm against his pajama top, over his stomach. “—I was stabbed. The bleeding wouldn’t stop.”

“That’s what the demons thought had happened as well. They might have hit you with an illusion, though.”

“There’s no way it would heal up this fast... Serena saved me.”

If Serena has the sort of ability the report from Ashmael

described, it's possible. However, whether he believes it is a different matter. "As I said, they probably only made you think you'd been stabbed."

"I was covered in blood, wasn't I?! In that case—"

"Listen to me, Auguste. That woman is the enemy."

"She might have some sort of reason!" Auguste immediately argues.

Resisting the urge to yell at him, James channels his bitter feelings into persuasion. "The woman abducted the crown princess and attempted to abduct the second prince and his fiancée. She may have been involved with the kidnapping of Ashmael's Daughter of God as well."

"Serena's acting on someone's orders. It has to be the Queendom of Hausel. She didn't have a choice, so—"

"No choice? As if she's that type of woman! She obviously cut a deal of some sort. It could be money; it could be rank within the Queendom. There's nothing that would force her to obey them. Even if she really did have no choice, I won't acknowledge it until she explains herself."

"But it's our fault she didn't discuss it with us or give a reason, isn't it?!"

They more or less dismantled the Gilbert county, stripped her of everything, and cut her off without hearing what she had to say. They've used her as a convenient pawn ever since— She has no reason to be loyal to them. Accusing her of betrayal would be ridiculous. They should just laugh and say it serves them right.

Then they can cut her off again, and that will be that. It's not irrational, and it isn't malicious.

However, Auguste doesn't think it's right.

"There's something more to this. There has to be! James, let me talk to the demon king. It's my fault Ailey was kidnapped, but please don't do anything awful to Serena. I'll talk to her, so—"

"Enough!" James grabs Auguste by the shirtfront, shoving his face so close that their noses are practically touching. "Don't tell me you intend to betray us."

"I-it's not like that...!"

"Then what is this? That woman's position was decided by the demon king and his wife, and it serves her right. You're criticizing that and trying to help her now, after all this time? It wouldn't be odd for them to assume that you have an ulterior motive."

Auguste's eyes are wide. He bears the title of Holy Knight. The crown princess's abduction is being kept under wraps, so it probably won't be an issue, but a blunder like his would ordinarily have gotten him expelled. And defending her kidnapper on top of that? Even

thoughtlessness has limits.

“Or are you saying that woman should have killed me for being a demon at Misha Academy?”

Auguste’s shoulders droop dejectedly. “I’m sorry...”

“You should be. Stay here for a while and cool your head.”

“Oh...but Ailey... Have they really not found her yet?”

The question does seem like an afterthought, but Auguste’s eyes are serious, so he answers him. “No, they haven’t. Prince Claude is working on it, though.”

“I see... Then it’ll be fine, won’t it. The weather’s nice and everything...”

“It really doesn’t seem fine to me.”

“Huh? Why not? What are you talking about?”

“At any rate, things are busy right now. You just sit tight and behave. I’m going back to work.”

“I really do want to talk to the demon king, though. When do you think he’ll have time?”

Auguste doesn’t know when to quit. James sighs, getting to his feet. “No idea. Probably after his second wedding ceremony.”

“Huh?”

“See you,” James says, and turns on his heel. A moment later, Auguste’s shriek echoes in the peaceful autumn sky.

Luciel’s eyes meet Aileen’s wide ones. As he sprints toward her, he gives her a breezy smile. “Oh, I did wonder who showed up. Turns out it’s you, huh?!”

“Why are you here— Wait, what is that chasing you?!”

Luciel is running full tilt, and behind him are soldiers whose clothes, hair, eyes, and skin are all pure white. Several hundred warriors armed with spears are chasing him, moving in perfect synch.

“I stepped right into a trap for demons! Tee-hee.”

“Don’t ‘tee-hee’ me!”

Focusing power into her hands, Aileen blows the vanguard away. With a light crumbling noise, a hole opens in the darkness. As he runs past her, Luciel tosses her a warning. “I’d get moving if I were you! If you break those, the corridor collapses, too!”

“Tell me that sooner, would you?!”

In other words, there’s nothing for it but to flee to the exit. Aileen breaks into a sprint, coming up beside Luciel. She’s fairly sure the exit isn’t far.

“You run pretty fast in those high heels!!”

“Any demon king’s wife worthy of the name must be able to run in heels! And what are you doing here?!”

“Well, it’s for Claude’s sake! Did he finally cast you aside?!”

“Perish the thought. I’ve come to spy on the enemy for him! Father, on your left!”

An enormous hand appears out of nowhere, plummeting toward them. Luciel turns it into sand with a mere glance.

“Magic works here, then?”

“Woman, you don’t believe I’m a god, do you?”

“I thought you were only equal to Elefas at the moment.”

“My strength is coming back! If I had a little more, I’d be able to blow my way through this corridor, but since *somebody* stole a ton of my magic, I can’t get my power balanced!”

“Goodness, what an awful daughter-in-law you’ve got!”

A wall suddenly appears in front of her, and she kicks it apart. Even as she does so, the white soldiers close in on them from behind.

“And? Claude still hasn’t returned to the demon realm?”

“As if I’d let that happen! He is my husband!”

“You’re something else yourself, but that boy really does take after my wife, I swear! Stubbornly hanging in there until the very last minute—”

The shining exit comes into sight. However, in a classic move, the light draws together, shrinking. Aileen flings the sacred sword at the dwindling light, and in the same moment, Luciel’s eyes open. The left one is red, while the right one has turned violet.

“—Then thinking if he’s satisfied, that’s all that matters, and leaving everyone else behind.”

The two of them leap into the exit they’ve forced open. Silvery white light engulfs the passage and white soldiers behind them, swirls into a vortex, then vanishes.

Panting heavily, Aileen turns to speak Luciel, but then her eyes widen. “F-Father... That eye... And your hair as well.”

His gray hair is turning white, and it seems less shaggy as well. Luciel tilts his head, perplexed. “I may be close to reverting to godhood. We’re running out of time.”

“R-reverting to...godhood? Father, didn’t you become human at least once?”

In the ending of Game 4 where the Maid of the Sacred Sword founds Imperial Ellmeyer, Luciel chooses to live as a human. As when Claude is successfully romanced in Game 1, Luciel seals his demon king aspect into the demon realm.

However, what she’s seeing now brings another possibility to mind.

It can’t be... Did he marry the Maid of the Sacred Sword as the demon king? Regardless of the Queen ending, or the Maid of the Sacred Sword ending, or the oath...?

The demon king was born into the family descended from the demon king: It's a perfectly sound conclusion to reach. Couldn't that be why the demon king was born into Ellmeyer's imperial family, which is descended from the Maid of the Sacred Sword?

She thinks it couldn't possibly be that, and yet if it is, several things make sense. The history after the founding of the Ellmeyer Empire, which has nothing to do with the game. Demons roaming the land, frequent disasters... If this man declared himself emperor while he was still the demon king, it would also explain the Queendom of Hausel's delay in acknowledging them.

However, if the demon king was emperor, it's unnatural that there's no mention of it anywhere.

Most of all, the significance of the great disaster that occurred before the Queendom acknowledged the empire changes drastically. If the demon king were the emperor, an invasion by a horde of demons could never have happened.

Slowly, she raises her eyes. Luciel is watching her steadily. Those quiet eyes, two different colors. Violet and red, as if symbolizing the sacred and the demonic.

"To tell you the truth, I don't actually dislike you. I bet my wife would have liked you, too. No doubt she'd tell Claude, 'You've snagged yourself a good woman. You're my son, all right!' If you'd been a nasty wife, I wouldn't have minded letting Claude eat you...but he wouldn't want that." As Luciel speaks, he's wearing a father's expression.

She catches his arm. "Father— What happened, long ago? It has something to do with your constant concern that Master Claude will be possessed, doesn't it? Did something happen to his mother...?"

"I can't say."

"You don't trust me? But I genuinely want to protect Master Claude—"

Luciel tugs at the collar of his shirt, loosening it. She sucks in her breath.

His neck is densely inscribed with a spell.

"It's a restraint I set on myself so I could come here. I can't give any details regarding my wife, and I won't. I can't call her name, either."

"Wh-why not?"

"Because it will anger the true form in the demon realm. I can't let it swallow me any more than Claude can. See, right now, I'm Claude's good dad— What's that face for?"

She's been thinking, *What is this fussy father-in-law talking about?* And it apparently shows in her expression.

Luciel plants his hands on his hips, standing tall. "Listen, my true

form is really scary, all right? If we become one again, we'll bring back the demon god's golden age. Do you understand what that means?"

"All I can see is the pitiful father-in-law who's standing before me now."

"I'd like to go back to my golden-age self and kill you without mercy."

"Yes, I see, you're trying to make yourself sound like a demon king. Master Claude has a tendency to do that as well. Actually, Father, do you want to go back to your golden days?"

"Mm... I'd have to fuse with my true form and also uncork the demon realm. That would mean dragging Claude into the mess. As the current demon king, he's the key to the seal." He mentions something that could affect the world's continued existence as if it were nothing. "The true form wants to go back, but I'm pretty sure my wife would get mad at me if I dragged our son into this. The true form seems to be dimly aware of that as well. There's no way I'd be able to move independently if it wasn't. Still...it probably can't stand getting rid of an impossible dream."

"An impossible dream...?"

"To erase everything as if it had never been, then make a fresh start in the future with my wife. Parenthetically, the 'everything' it wants to erase is every human on earth, for starters."

The scale is far too large.

"I—I really do hope you'll keep that true form sealed, then..."

"Hey, that's mean. This is what's wrong with humans. But the thing is..." Luciel gently covers his red left eye. "To be honest, even if I tried to talk about my wife's death, quite a bit of it is vague. I think I've forced all the negative emotions—the sadness and anger and hopeless longing—onto the true form. All I have is all the happiness and love my wife gave me, and the thought that I mustn't let our son go through the same thing. Funny, isn't it... I loved my wife so much, and I can't even remember how she died." His pained voice sounds like he's spitting blood.

Watching him steadily, Aileen sighs. "All right. I won't ask anything else."

"...Hmm. I thought you'd mock me more and call me a coward."

"I imagine it's painful to speak of," she tells him, quite directly. Luciel looks mystified. "Bringing it up again would be in poor taste, and I'll do no such thing. I also have the vague feeling that it is her love that enables you to do this, even as your true form threatens to swallow you."

"...My wife's?"

"If I were Mother, I wouldn't leave my husband to fend for himself

when he was in this state. Her soul may be unexpectedly close, and you simply haven't noticed it."

Granted, if she shows up claiming to be Claude's destined lover and tries to steal her position as his wife, it's going to be a nuisance, but she'll cross that bridge when she comes to it. She'll take her on.

"Besides, what's important is what you intend to do now. It would be helpful to know what happened in the past, of course, but it isn't an absolute requirement."

"....."

"Most of all, you came here to protect Master Claude, didn't you, Father? If nothing else, I understand that. Thank you."

Luciel blinks slowly—and by the time he smiles, his violet eye is red again. "Oh, I really do hate this about humans."

"Still, I categorically refuse to return Master Claude to the demon realm. I won't be handing him over to fate, either."

"Yes, I hope that's how it turns out. And? What are you going to do now?"

That's right. She's supposed to be reconnoitering in enemy territory. Aileen looks around the hushed room. Is it a drawing room? Two sofas face each other across a low table with cat's paw legs. No fire is lit in the fireplace behind them.

A sense of *déjà vu* makes her frown. Isn't this room exactly as it was in the game? She doesn't remember it down to the details, of course, but her general impression is that it seems unchanged. If it's stayed like this for the past several centuries—it's almost as if someone has stopped time.

Goose bumps prickle up on her arms. Aileen rubs them once, then looks up at Luciel. "What will you do, Father?"

"Hmm... Well, I'm curious about what you're going to do, so I'll stick with you."

"But weren't you here on business of your own?"

"I thought I'd check up on the current situation in the Queendom. There's no telling what will irritate the true form, though, so I avoid places and things that might remind me of my wife. I make it so I can't see myself in mirrors, too."

"You can't see yourself in mirrors... So that's why the clothing you choose is so, um..."

"No, it's because if my true form is reflected and we make eye contact, it'll take me over right then and there! I hope I'm overthinking all this, but... Wait! If I am, wouldn't I just be an annoying dad?! And Claude already looks at me coldly!" Luciel shrieks. Apparently he's aware that he's considered a nuisance.

Rolling her eyes, Aileen sets a hand on the door she's after, the one at the back of the room. If things are the way they were in the

game, this will be the queen's private chamber. There's no sign that the queen herself is inside, but there may be something there. Something connected to the past.

"It's all right. Master Claude is properly cold to you, isn't he?"

"What about that is all right?!"

"With his human father—His Majesty the Emperor—Claude only ever wore a polite smile."

He dealt with him as if he not only had no expectations, but wasn't even resigned. Granted, it would have been problematic if a man past the age of twenty-five who was about to become emperor had begun venting his resentment against his father like a simple child, but even so. "The mere fact that he revolts against you as he should means his attitude is preferable to—"

Aileen opens the door, and the very first thing she sees makes her gasp.

Once again, the room seems to be just as it was in the game.

The one thing that's definitely different is the portrait. A portrait of the queen hangs on the wall.

A faceless queen, with everything above the neck slashed to ribbons.

"Why would anyone... It can't be— Did the queen do this herself?"

If she hadn't, they never would have left it this way. It isn't as if a thief has come in and done it just now. Everything except the portrait is neat and tidy. The bed is made, the tables are nicely polished, and the big, full-length mirror is cloudless as it reflects Aileen—

"What?!"

For a moment, Aileen thinks she's seen a black-haired woman's reflection imposed on her own, and she starts. When she blinks, though, the figure disappears.

She looked just like Grace Dark, the villainess of Game 4...I think. I-it can't have been a ghost, can it?

Timidly, she approaches the mirror.

From behind her, Luciel asks, "Did you see something?"

"Some—?! What do you mean by 'something'?!"

"That's not just a mirror. Hausel uses it to unmask men and demons. It shows the person as they are or should be. It's called a mirror of truth."

"A mirror of truth?! This?!"

Those appeared in the game as well. If she recalls, there was an event where Luciel himself was dragged in front of this one and revealed for what he was.

"I'm pretty sure. I can't see myself, though, so I dunno."

"I—I can see you, Master Luciel, but...you look properly human."

“Then maybe it isn’t operational yet. Still, men who don’t believe this exists and try to sneak into Hausel dressed as women end up getting put through hell. So did you see something?”

“N-no. I’m sure I saw wrong. Yes, my eyes were playing tricks on —”

She touches the mirror softly with her fingertips, and it instantly flares with light. Startled, she backs up quickly, but the light promptly goes out, and the mirror shows a place that isn’t here.

“Wh-what?! What is this?!”

“I bet you turned it on.”

What? No..., she thinks, looking into the mirror. Then her eyes widen.

She knows this place. Not only does she know it, it’s fresh in her memory.

It’s the place where the Maid of the Sacred Sword declared the foundation of the empire and held the sacred sword aloft. It’s where Claude once gave up his right to inherit the throne, and where the title of crown prince was restored to him.

An alabaster altar, surrounded by pillars. Imperial Ellmeyer’s ceremonial site.

A path of velvet carpet crosses the marble floor. On it, her husband is walking slowly toward the altar. He’s wearing a black cloak, and he’s arm in arm with a black-haired woman in a white bridal gown.

“Wha, wha, wha-wha-wha...?! Master Claude, and—”

It’s Grace. She can only see her back, but there’s no mistaking it.

Without thinking, Aileen clings to the mirror’s frame. When she does, she begins to hear voices.

“Who’d have thought he’d take a second consort so soon?”

“She’s the next queen of the Queendom of Hausel. A worthy partner.”

“I hear they offered money for the royal exam.”

“Still, this was quite the precipitous ceremony. Even if it is so they can stand on the balcony together at the birthday celebration tomorrow, a marriage ceremony with less than a week of preparation...”

“A marriage ceremony?!”

Aileen shrieks, but her voice doesn’t seem to travel beyond the mirror. Luciel leans in for a look. “Huh? Claude? What’s going on here?”

“F-Father... Erm, it was today that we spoke in Ashmael, wasn’t it?” She tries to calm down, to confirm one aspect of the situation at a time.

Luciel looks puzzled. “Huh? No, that was earlier. I’m not positive, but it was probably the day before yesterday.”

“Wha— Don’t tell me time flows differently in that crystal and the

passage... Wait. In that case, I've been—"

Abducted... Or that's how it will have been interpreted, at any rate.

Her mind begins to work at dizzying speed. *I—I was kidnapped before the Foundation Festival. Tomorrow is the birthday, the festival's final day. So I've been missing for nearly a week?! Then, naturally, my abductor will have issued demands...*

Someone in the Queendom of Hausel drew Serena to their side and spirited away Aileen. For now, she'll set aside the question of whether it was the whole Queendom or someone acting alone.

At any rate, the crown princess has been kidnapped. The kidnapper must have given Claude an ultimatum.

For example, marry Grace Dark, the royal candidate.

"Uh, say, this wouldn't be a wedding, would...it...?"

Luciel's eyes turn from the mirror to her, and his voice trails off.

"Yes... I imagine it is. They got us... Heh-heh. Yes, of course. If I'm here, Master Claude can't tell whether I'm safe or not. Of course this is how it would go. Don't tell me— Is this fate?"

"Huh? Fate? Wait, is that girl—?"

"At this point, that doesn't matter one bit!"

Considered in the usual way, the prime suspect is undoubtedly Grace Dark, since she'll benefit by passing the royal exam. However, it's possible there's someone behind the girl, and if she starts thinking about that, there'll be no end to it.

The problem is the fact that a woman Aileen has not approved is arm in arm with Aileen's husband, attempting to hold a wedding ceremony without Aileen's knowledge.

"They say the crown princess is so despondent that she's taken to her bed..."

Who is despondent and laid up in bed, where, and when?

With her eyes riveted on her target, Aileen raises a fist. The sacred sword grows from it.

Luciel flinches back, looking frightened. "Huh? What? What are you going to do with that?"

"This, obviously!"

She brings it down with all her might. There's a sharp noise, and a crack runs through the mirror.

Preparations for the crown prince of Ellmeyer's second wedding were rushed beyond all comparison to the first.

After all, the ceremony was being held in tandem with the Foundation Festival. There was no process or anything like it. They abbreviated what they could, paring it down to the bare minimum,

and even then there wasn't enough time. By necessity, the guests were the same ones who'd been invited to the Foundation Festival.

Even so, it had worked out somehow because the Queendom of Hausel had had everything ready. They'd ended up leaving everything from Claude's outfit to the altar decorations to the Queendom.

Some of the aristocrats had grimaced at the idea of holding the ceremony in accordance with the Queendom's customs, but there just wasn't time. On top of that, the prime minister—the crown princess's father—had smiled and said, "It won't cost us anything. What's the problem?" This left them unable to argue. Claude had zero emotional investment in the ceremony, and he didn't care about any of it.

As long as nothing that had been used in his wedding with Aileen was reused in this one, anything was fine with him.

In the end, all Ellmeyer had provided was the venue, the ceremonial site. The Queendom of Hausel had added a pair of large mirrors: one in front of the altar, the other above the door. The rest of the decorations were quite simple.

The abrupt notification had perplexed the citizenry as well. Many of them seemed to think that this was a ceremony for the Foundation Festival instead of a marriage. The Queendom of Hausel did nothing to correct this misconception.

In other words, becoming my second consort isn't the main objective, hmm?

Keith pulls on Claude's black cloak and releases his loosely braided hair, then stands up. "All right. That will do, Master Claude."

"I'll go get this over with, then," he says coldly, turning to leave. Keith bows his head, seeing him off. Just like always.

The ceremonial site has no roof, not even over the altar and the audience seating that surrounds it. There were concerns that this would be a problem if it rained, but the weather is crisp and clear. His emotions are completely paralyzed, so it's luck, plain and simple.

Blank-faced, Claude stands next to the woman. She's dressed in a white bridal gown, with a veil over her face. He doesn't care who's in there, so he doesn't feel like talking to her. However, the woman speaks to him. "Are you angry?"

"I have no opinion about you one way or the other. To be honest, I suspect I'll forget your name."

There's a brief pause, and then the woman laughs quietly behind her veil. "It's Grace Dark... Still, being the subject of such intense disinterest is actually rather delightful."

"I'm not enjoying it. Are you?"

"Having a wedding has always been a dream of mine. Of course, ideally, you would be in love with me, but I'm quite satisfied enough as it is. I won't be greedy."

The trumpets sound, signaling for them to enter. They seem like a summons to heaven... Or is it hell?

When he holds his arm out, the woman laces her hand through it. As before, he feels nothing. It's actually rather curious.

She looks so much like the Maid of the Sacred Sword who appears in his dreams, and yet...

As they stand side by side, waiting for the doors to open, the woman speaks to him again. "What is Lady Aileen doing?"

He doesn't think, *Of all the brazen...* There's no proof that this woman was involved in Aileen's kidnapping. All Auguste saw was Serena's betrayal, and Serena gave the demons the slip and disappeared.

Aileen's wedding ring has been imbued with his magic, but since he can't trace its presence, it's too dangerous to have the demons search for it. It's very likely that it's being blocked by sacred power, as it was in Ashmael.

That means, if he's going to use anyone, it should be the humans. Unusually, the knights had actually volunteered their help, but he'd put together only a bare-bones search party.

Come to think of it, Isaac and the rest of that group seem as if they'd be the first to make a move, but I haven't been able to make contact with them.

Still, even if they had been here, Claude would have done the same thing: Wait.

"I hear she's taken to her bed. Would it be a nuisance if I went to greet her?"

"No doubt you'll get to greet her soon anyway."

"One can only hope." Her tone is a little mocking, and for the first time, Claude's lips curve.

"The way you speak has changed. I think both your attitude and your gestures were a bit different earlier. Is this who you really are?"

"...No, I'm nervous, so I can't manage as usual. I do apologize."

"I'm not interested, so it doesn't matter. However... Yes. Even if you used one of your vaunted divine items, you won't be able to contain her."

The double doors swing open.

He steps onto the velvet carpet. No petals flutter down around them. A moment later, the woman takes a step forward as well.

"She'll break free. She's the demon king's wife; it's only natural that she'd be capable of such things."

"....."

"In other words, if she's still a captive, then it's on purpose. That's the trouble with her. She leaps into the enemy's midst without a second thought. Always for my sake." Casting an apathetic glance at

the sky, Claude advances down the carpeted path. "That's why I'm not angry at you. The one I'm angry with is my one and only wife."

It's a quiet ceremony. He moves through a hush that's like the calm before the storm. Silently, indifferently.

"She does whatever she pleases, ignoring the fact that her husband is worried. It's always been like that. On top of that, she keeps attracting men who aren't me. On reflection, I realized that the first thing I should do is teach her what happens when she leaves me alone. If I do that, then no doubt she'll stop choosing to leave my side recklessly. This is punishment," Claude explains. It's the same thing he told his subordinates.

"She's lovable as a hellion as well, but she's my wife now. I'll need her to settle down soon."

Clang! A sudden noise echoes from some untraceable source. A stir runs through the assembly, and the woman stops in her tracks, but Claude doesn't care. He keeps going, dragging her with him, until they're standing in front of the altar.

A marriage pledge has been set on that altar. Once he signs it, his job will be finished. Whatever happens after that, it won't be Claude's problem. This isn't his fault.

There's another *clang*, this one forceful enough to shake the entire venue. It's coming from behind them. Above the entrance hangs one of the twin mirrors provided by the Queendom of Hausel. They said something about how it reflects the true forms of things, but he doesn't care about that, either.

"For the sake of my beloved wife, I'll do anything. Even marry another woman."

In the next moment, with a noise like an explosion, the enormous mirror shatters. Screams go up, and the audience starts to scatter. Claude cocks his head slightly. Setting down the pen before he's signed the document, he turns around.

He's suspended the fragments of the demolished wall and mirror in midair so that no one will get hurt. Beyond the cloud of fragments, out of the mirror, steps—

"Welcome back, Aileen."

Apparently she finally snapped and kicked through the thing.

His wife, the most adorable one in the world, is looking down at him with a face like a man-eating demon. Claude offers her a breezy smile.

She didn't smash through the mirror because she had any sort of plan. She simply thought, *Don't you dare*. Then it connected to the location on the other side of the mirror. In other words, to Imperial Ellmeyer's

ceremonial site.

“Ye gods, I can’t stand this daughter-in-law! Linking two separate places with sheer rage? It may be a divine item, but even so!”

Her father-in-law is clutching his head in a corner of the room, but it hardly matters.

Setting her foot on the mirror’s frame, she leans out. A brisk wind is blowing. In the seats reserved for distinguished guests, Lilia has clapped a hand over her mouth and is choking back laughter, while several more familiar faces seem to be at their wits’ end. However, the majority of the audience is looking up at Aileen, stunned.

In front of the pillar-encircled altar, at the farthest point from Aileen, her husband turns around.

“Welcome back, Aileen.”

“Yes. I’ve returned, Master Claude. You look pleased.”

“My dear wife has interrupted my wedding ceremony to reclaim me. It’s a thrilling development.”

“I’m not about to steal you and run.” For the moment, she makes sure he understands that part.

Claude slowly descends from the altar, retracing the path he’s just taken. “That’s a shame. Now then, my darling Aileen, where have you been all this time?”

“In the Queendom of Hausel. Someone abducted me; I’ve just escaped.” At the word *abducted*, a murmur runs through the crowd. “If anyone doubts it, simply step through this mirror. You’ll be able to travel to Hausel instantly. —And? While I, the crown princess, was kidnapped, why is a marriage ceremony being held for one of Hausel’s royal candidates and my husband?”

“They threatened me quite bluntly. I was told to marry her if I valued your life. When uninvited brides take things this far, it’s an actual crime, isn’t it?”

“I expect she wanted to pass the royal exam no matter what, or something along those lines. However, a wedding isn’t a requirement for passing the royal exam, is it? It would please me very much if you explained this situation, Lady Grace.”

Gripping the mirror frame, Aileen looks down at the veiled woman beside Claude. “Or perhaps Her Majesty will step forward as the mastermind?”

They probably forced the ceremony to be held as part of the Foundation Festival. For good or ill, distinguished guests from other countries are here to bear witness. In choosing to implicate the queen, she’s cut off their path of retreat.



If she knows nothing, that's fine. Just as long as it looks like feigned ignorance!

That said, under these circumstances, she has no intention of letting the woman claim she knows nothing. Even if she genuinely doesn't know anything, she'll pull something out of her.

In the tense silence, the quiet giggle seems out of place.

Beneath her veil, the woman is laughing. Now, when she's all alone, with nowhere to run.

"What about this strikes you as amusing?"

"...Oh, I'm sorry. I only thought that when wishes come true, it's over so quickly."

Like the protagonist of a play, the woman in the wedding gown ascends to the altar. All by herself.

Then she turns back.

"One mustn't get careless, though. After all, this is only the beginning."

"—I have no idea what you're talking about. Explain yourself."

"Explain?"

Beneath her veil, the bride smiles. Her lips are bright red.

"What explanation would I give to a nation that's about to vanish?"

Abruptly, the floor bulges up. On seeing what emerges from it, Aileen's eyes widen in shock. They're pure white soldiers, the same as the ones in the passage. Troops created by a divine item. Magic can affect them, but in exchange, their weapons are able to wound humans as well.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I regret to inform you that as of today, this nation is finished."

Grace makes her declaration loudly. She's spoken as if announcing that a shop is closing for the day, and widening rings of chaos and confusion spread through the assembly.

The woman clasps her hands in front of her chest, as if in prayer. Her right hand begins to glow. "Have no fear, though. The Queendom of Hausel will not forsake you."

White soldiers are still welling up from the ground, and they all turn to face Claude, in the center of the structure.

"If you slay the demon king, no doubt you will be forgiven."

Grace vanishes like a heat mirage. The pale soldiers lunge at Claude.

"Master Claude!"

Explosions go up, along with screams from the audience and clouds of dust—and a wave of soldiers is tossed into the sky like so many discarded dolls.

“Thanks, Walt and Kyle.” From exactly the same spot he’d occupied before the attack, Claude speaks to the guards below him. “You’re definitely my bodyguards. How dependable.”

“You’re not fooling us. You didn’t even try to run, did you?! You were just standing there waiting, weren’t you?!”

“We’ll have Master Keith lecture him later! Walt, they’re coming!”

“There’s no end to them.” Blowing the airborne soldiers to smithereens, Elefas materializes. “They’re most likely made of sand. On top of that, they’re being continuously supplied with power through the ground. We’ll have to begin by dealing with them at the source.”

“Master Claude, the audience!” Aileen, who’s been watching from above, leaps at the white soldiers: They’ve begun to attack the spectators as well as Claude. As Elefas says, soldiers she cuts down with the sacred sword turn to sand and disappear—but more promptly emerge from the ground. They’re endless.

“Hurry, teleport everyone to—is that a barrier?!” Looking up at the sky, Aileen grits her teeth: The scenery is subtly warped. The barrier’s being cast by a holy item. Claude can’t use his magic this way.

“Isn’t there a convenient holy king among the guests who can teleport inside sacred barriers?”

“His visit was changed to follow the visit to the Queendom of Hausel, so he’s only scheduled to attend tomorrow,” Keith tells Claude in an easygoing tone. He’s entered the venue and is picking up weapons that are lying around. “You can use these, can’t you? Even if they’re the enemy’s weapons. Also, Master Claude, you mustn’t be lazy.”

“I see. Yes, so it seems.”

“Is this any time to be taking it easy?! Here, I’ll break that barrier!”

“No, Aileen, don’t bother. There’s no need for that.”

“What?”

“Aren’t these soldiers using holy swords?”

While his guards and mage fight a battle that consists of tearing and throwing, tearing and throwing, Claude retrieves a blade from the ground. “That means we can just do this.”

At lightning speed, the tip of his sword sketches a neat half circle, then slams into the floor.

The ground sinks. The barrier crumbles and vanishes, and the soldiers all disintegrate. In what seems like an afterthought, the holy sword Claude’s holding crumbles away as well.

How...formidable...

The holy sword doesn’t care who wields it, and so Claude added

magic to it under the same principle as Aileen's sacred sword. Not only that, but he readies a new holy sword that Keith just handed to him as well. He hasn't broken a sweat.

The holy sword is a dangerous weapon that can take even the demon king's life, but letting the demon king wield it seems quite dangerous as well.

An atmosphere of relief and bewilderment hangs over the venue. For now, the immediate threat has been vanquished, and so confusion seems to be winning out over chaos.

We'll need to evacuate the audience now, while we can, then find out where that woman's gone... No, more importantly, I should return to the Queendom...

Since she's thinking, Aileen doesn't register the figure that's emerged from the mound of sand.

"Ailey!"

Walt's scream makes her turn, but by then, the tip of a sword is bearing down on her. Before it can reach her, someone puts an arm around her waist and pulls her to him. Claude's magic and the enemy's holy power clash right before her eyes, channeled through their swords, and a blast wind rages.

"Master Claude... General Ares?!"

Still held to Claude's side, Aileen stares wide-eyed at the man who's slashed at him. As she watches, the sword begins to melt in Claude's hands. *Tsking* in irritation, Claude knocks Ares away with a shock wave of magic. Ares falls backward toward the ground, but flips and lands on his feet, slashing through the mass of magic Claude's sent after him. The aftershock blows away the wall by the audience seating, and more screams ring out. Beyond them, Elefas has cast a wall of magic.

As Claude supplements his melting holy sword with magic, Aileen checks with him. "G-General Ares is using another holy sword, isn't he? Then why is yours the one that..."

"Because his has a sacred stone set in it. Not only that, but he seems to have mastered its use. Has he started to develop a little holy power? ...Come to think of it, he is the holy king's cousin, isn't he. He's predisposed to it, then."

Even as Claude analyzes the situation, he doesn't take his eyes off Ares. Aileen bites her lip.

By rights, Ares is the character who should have mastered the holy sword and killed the holy king when the fiend dragon possessed him. Even if the holy king had been corrupted, Ares had been destined to defeat someone on that level. He has plenty of latent sacred power.

"As opponents, we're a bad match. Why isn't the holy king here with the holy sword? He's the one that man should resent and

challenge... Or no, is he not here because it would be inconvenient if he were?"

"Don't tell me Master Baal is absent because—"

"I suspect he's lying dead in the Queendom of Hausel right about now."

The ground writhes again, and white troops emerge.

"Master Claude, I'll deal with General Ares! The sacred sword won't lose to the holy sword."

"No, his sword arm is better than yours. Not only that, but from what I've seen, the force of your weapons is roughly equal."

"But!"

Dropping into a low crouch, Ares charges at them. Walt and Kyle lunge at him from either side, striking him to the ground before he can reach them. White soldiers attempt to leap at them from behind, but Elefas circles around behind them and blows them away with magic.

"Your orders, Prince Claude?"

"—Prime Minister d'Autriche. Evacuate the spectators, and have everyone in the castle town flee to the far side of the fifth layer. The enemy is going to charge from here to the old castle in the north; don't let ordinary citizens near the area. You may mobilize both the knights and the Holy Knights."

Rudolph bows; he's in the seating for distinguished guests directly behind Claude. Next to him, Cedric begins to rise to his feet. "Brother."

"As usual, don't take your eyes off your fiancée."

Swallowing down something, Cedric nods and takes Lilia's hand. When Aileen shoots a furtive glance their way, Lilia's face lights up, and she waves at her. She shouldn't have looked.

"James, I assume you can hear me. I leave the demons to you. Enemies have appeared in the imperial capital; either eliminate them all or lead them here. Keith, you and Elefas guard Aileen. Don't move from this spot."

"Understood, milord. Come, Lady Aileen. This way."

Keith holds out his hand, but Aileen shakes her head. "Please wait, Master Claude! Let me help—"

"Walt and Kyle, you fall back. I'll fight the general. He has his own natural ability, plus the power of the holy sword, and likely the Daughter of God's protection and Serena's aid as well. He's too much for you two."

That's so strong, it's practically a cheat, isn't it?

As if to prove Claude's words, Ares gets to his feet as if nothing's wrong. Entreating Claude again, Aileen grabs his clothing, clinging to him. "Master Claude, I'll fight, too!"

“You don’t have to worry, Aileen.”

Ares swings his sword. The sacred attack closes in on them, and Claude slashes it down cleanly. “I said we were a bad match, but I didn’t say I couldn’t win.” Still holding Aileen, Claude slides a hand over her cheek, smiling sweetly. “Your husband is strong. Probably the strongest in the world.”

“Master Claude...”

“Once in a while, trust me and watch.”

That’s right: He is her husband. She must believe in him. Swallowing down her unease, she nods.

When she rises to her tiptoes, their lips meet naturally. They exchange a brief look, and then, gently, he lowers her into the audience seats. Keith and Elefas are waiting for her farther back.

Touching down at a distance from Aileen, Claude points his sword straight at Ares. “Now then, human. I’ll grant you the honor of challenging the demon king one-on-one.”

His red eyes glitter ominously, and he runs his tongue over the lips that have just kissed her. His beauty is that of a savage beast licking its chops at the sight of prey. It’s twisted with delight and extreme belligerence.

“Rest assured, by the end, you’ll be begging me to kill you.”

Believe in your husband, she tells herself firmly. *Believe that he still has a human heart.*

He thought it might be fireworks, but there weren’t any on the schedule. The pillar of light that rises from the ceremonial site is abnormal— Something’s happened. Auguste has been glued to the window; now he grabs his Holy Knights’ jacket from the back of a chair and picks up his sword. Pulling his uniform on, he tries to open the door, and the sensation in his fingertips makes his eyes widen.

“...Magic?”

He doesn’t know how he knows. However, a tingling numbness definitely ran through his fingertips just now.

Instinctively, he knows it’s James.

It’s a spell to monitor anyone who enters or leaves the room. It may be to keep him from leaving without permission, or it could be so they’ll know if Serena comes... Although that second development would be much too convenient for him.

He bites his lip. *Oh—I really do have excellent friends.*

He grabs the knob, turns it, opens the door, and runs. Thinking *I’m sorry* would probably be cowardly.

He’s on the second floor, so he jumps out a window to save himself trouble, then heads straight, intending to cut through the

forest.

Another explosion echoes from the ceremonial site. At the same time, something that's emerged ahead of him makes Auguste narrow his eyes and set a hand on his sword hilt.

That's not human!

It isn't a demon, either, and he slashes through the white soldier with one stroke. The sensation makes him stop in his tracks.

The power he's just cut through is the same as what was given to him the time he almost died.

"Serena..."

The ground bulges. More white soldiers emerge, and Auguste gets a firmer grip on his sword.

She's close.

He doesn't know how long he'll be able to sense her. Thinking isn't his strong suit, though, so that's perfect.

He takes off in the direction that feels right, believing that she'll be there.

Feeling as if someone has called her, Serena abruptly opens her eyes. Sahra notices and gets a bit flustered. "A-are you all right? We should heal your wound..."

"No, I'm fine. Still, we could probably take a break."

She withdraws her hand from the water. A big drop of blood falls from her sliced fingertip and is swallowed by the ripples.

Originally, the divine item was meant to circulate water through the earth. A long, thin pole connects a shallow dish made of sacred stone to the ground. The dish is filled with water, and sacred power is poured into it, sending it circulating through the soil. Serena put her wounded hand into that water and shared her blood with it, sending power to the ceremonial site to assist that woman.

As she's gazing at her bleeding fingertip, Sahra takes out a cloth. She wraps her hand in it, and when she opens it again, the bleeding has stopped. Sahra has healed it for her.

She thought the girl was a failed Daughter of God, just a fool who let it go to her head, but her power is real. Granted, when she came to her and begged for help, restraining her husband as he thrashed in pain, Serena thought it sounded like a drag, but...

"Thanks."

Sahra shakes her head, then looks at the ceremonial site, where noises continue to echo.

"D-do you think...he'll be all right? Ares, I mean. H-he's fighting the demon king, isn't he...?"

"He's got a holy sword we both reinforced. He should be able to

manage that much.”

“Yes... Yes, you’re right. But will it really work...? Is it actually going to be all right? Can we trust that person?”

“No idea. I don’t.”

“You don’t?!”

Sahra sounds shocked. Stepping away from her, Serena sits down on a crumbling wall.

This abandoned garden is in a corner of the capital, near the demon king’s forest, and it’s quiet. The noises in the distance could easily be mistaken for fireworks.

“You’re too trusting. Are you stupid?”

“Uh... W-well, I’m not that clever, but still—!”

“Consider what could happen if someone sells you out, too. You’re planning to give your husband a fresh start, remember?”

Sahra squeezes the cloth tightly; she’s trembling. The desperate girl looks like a small animal, and it makes Serena feel like a bully.

“The things Ares did are my fault as well. I apologize for everything, so please...”

Why are you apologizing?

That thought had bubbled up unbidden. It had irritated her, and she’d helped the girl against her better judgment...although her “help” had consisted of saying, “If you’re the Daughter of God, why not heal him?” and putting some of her blood on her palm.

And then Sahra actually healed him. Fools are scary. Not only that, but she seems to have taken an odd liking to Serena, which makes her uncomfortable.

“Listen, think for yourself. Women who don’t just get preyed upon. It’s happening to you as we speak, isn’t it? That husband of yours is total scum.”

“Y-you’d go that far...? Th-then why are you doing what we were told, Miss Serena?”

“Because my friend...” After she’s said it, she thinks she should correct it, then decides not to. Explaining seems like too much work. “My friend believes in the one who told us.”

“So you do have a friend, Miss Serena.”

She smacks her on the head. Sahra claps her hands over the crown of her head, tearing up. “Y-your personality’s nothing like what it was in Ashmael...!”

“Of course not. I was scamming you then.”

“That’s mean!”

“Gracious. Look at the heroines of Games 2 and 3, making friends and leaving me out in the cold.” Lilia materializes between them, hugging her knees, and both Serena and Sahra scream. “You don’t have enough respect for previous games. I’m the original heroine, you

know.”

“Wha...? Wh-where did you come from?! You must have guards. What happened?!”

“I gave them the slip, obviously. It looked more fun over here.”

Rising to her feet, Lilia eyes Serena—and Sahra, who’s hidden behind her—then smiles at them. “I see. You’ve maxed out the affection counter and really fallen in love, hmm? No wonder General Ares seemed like a real hero. Auguste may get there as well, if this keeps up. There’s no point in becoming the divine king and the Holy Knight now, though; the games are over. It’s going to be pretty hard to make a comeback from here.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

“Ignore her. The woman’s wrong in the head.”

“That’s sooo mean. But even if General Ares is fully awakened and has the holy sword, if he’s fighting the demon king, the odds are bad. Against the holy king, his plot armor might have come through for him, but... I’m pretty sure Auguste couldn’t handle the demon king, either. After all, the one he’s supposed to defeat is James, and it’s not as if he has the sacred sword.”

Sahra’s squeezing her arm tightly. She’s probably thinking what Serena’s thinking.

“...You two say the same things.”

“What things?”

“Auguste was supposed to defeat that cambion and become the Holy Knight, and the general should have defeated the holy king and become the divine king... She said that was their true destiny.”

“Lady Aileen doesn’t say things like that. So was this one of Her Majesty’s visions of the future?”

She seems to take their silence as a “yes.” Lilia seats herself on the fence, in the spot where Serena was sitting earlier. “Hmm. Prophetic dreams follow the game’s classic route, then. But did that really convince you to cheerily say ‘We’ll reclaim our destinies!’ and sign on with the Queendom of Hausel? That would be disappointing. If Lady Aileen finds this place, she’ll send it flying with one blow, you know.”

“...Aileen Lauren d’Autriche will lose.”

“Lady Aileen is my favorite by a mile, and I’ve raised her myself. There’s no way she’d lose—”

“The sacred sword is half formed, so she won’t be able to save the demon king.”

Lilia’s idly swinging legs stop, and she looks at her. “You don’t seem to be basing that on wishful thinking. But allying yourselves with the Queendom of Hausel because Lady Aileen’s going to lose would be a rather dull development. What should I do about this...? I’m busy, too, you know.” Those violet eyes focus on her.

The former Maid of the Sacred Sword. That's what people call this woman, and Aileen says she still has the sword. It seems plausible.

If it isn't true, she can't explain the pressure that's making it impossible for her to move so much as a finger.

"Let's skip this, all right?! My protagonist will win. You two will lose anyway, so why not just accept it? I don't recall making either of you protagonists."

"...W-we're—"

"Protagonists, hmm? ...Yes, you see that a lot, don't you. Stories where the protagonist is a princess with a really useful ability, like tears that turn into jewels."

Lilia blinks at her. Serena continues impassively, looking jaded, "The plots and endings of those stories are basically the same. She meets a kind prince, but he doesn't save her in time and she's killed. If he does make it in time, they marry, she loses her power, and they live happily ever after."

"Now that you mention it, that sounds about right."

"It's always struck me as strange. Why don't women like that string along three men at once, sell off those jewels, and win their freedom? I don't get why they'd give up their power, either. What a waste."

Lilia's expression has turned serious. She tilts her head. "...I assume it's because that's a vulgar mindset, and that personality type isn't a good fit for a pitiful protagonist."

"I see. In that case, I'm fine with not being the protagonist. I don't see anything wrong with using my ability however I want. Then I'll snag the best prince or whatever he is on my own."

As if she'd take any hand extended to her out of pity. The only hand she takes will belong to someone who's begging her to be his.

Stepping forward to stand beside her, Sahra squeezes Serena's hand.

What's with her? she thinks, but for some reason, she lets her stay like that.

"—Pfft! Snrk. Ah-ha-ha-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I see, oh yes, I see."

Lilia bursts out laughing, hugging her sides. She slaps the top of the wall with tears in her eyes. When this woman starts laughing, it goes on for a while.

"Th-the things you say are cuter than I gave you credit for, Serena."

"Cute?"

"Why didn't you trick Auguste and take him with you?"

Serena has no response for that. Beside her, Sahra looks up with a gasp. "Th-that's right. She told us to grab a man named Auguste if we

could...”

“Be quiet. That idiot’s useless.”

“But we’re making Ares fight the demon king! She said Auguste would do just as well.”

“You’d already brought your husband with you, so why not him?”

Sahra’s lower lip is trembling. She looks as though she feels tricked, but Serena refuses to sympathize. If she thinks she saved her for free, she’s got another think coming.

Wiping away tears of laughter with her fingertips, Lilia turns toward them. “You didn’t want to make him fight with James, did you. After all, those two are close. Oh, I see; so that’s why Auguste got stabbed. If you can’t use someone, you get rid of them. That’s basic strategy. Right...”

Lilia trails off in midsentence, putting a hand to her chest. The silence is unsettling, and Serena frowns. “What? Why did you shut up all of a sudden?”

“You know, I may like the current characters quite a bit. I guess it’s only to be expected: No matter how useless characters are at first, as you keep using them, you get attached... All right. I’ll wait. I’ve begun wanting to see what will happen to you. In exchange...” Lilia smiles. “You mustn’t hit the reset button. This is my save data. It’s fine if I erase it, but I’m not letting anyone else get away with that.”

With every clash of their swords, blast winds and shock waves make the whole ceremonial site shudder. Almost as an afterthought, the white troops are being blown away, but Claude’s guards dispose of them for him.

Huh. He’s actually pretty tough.

Ares has circled around behind him. Repelling his sword with a barrier, Claude rises into the air. Ares launches himself off the ground, following him. He thrusts his blade at him, but Claude strikes it to the side. As its tip slashes up, Claude catches it, and the sword he’s using begins to crumble. Tilting his head to dodge the sword’s point, Claude takes a fresh blade from a white soldier his guards have tossed into the air.

“Good grief. Why don’t you go fight this death match with the holy king?”

Claude raises his sword above his head, then brings it down. Evading, Ares spins, returning to the ground. His brows draw together slightly.

He’d heard that the man had been heavily drugged with demon snuff, but apparently he’s lucid. He doesn’t seem to have been brainwashed, either. Without hesitating, Claude launches a follow-up

attack. "Why are you here? Did Hausel put you up to this again? Did they offer you some sort of reward for killing the demon king?"

"....."

"What about the Daughter of God? Have you abandoned her?"

There's no response. *Well, it doesn't matter.* Shifting to a two-handed grip, Claude swings his blade in a great vertical slash. Ares can't evade the rough attack completely; his back slams into the wall, and he goes down.

Looking down at him from midair, Claude mutters, "If you don't answer, I'll just kill you."

"...The divine king." Climbing unsteadily to his feet, Ares finally speaks. "They told me that's what I should have been. Would have been..."

"If that slipshod insurrection had succeeded, then yes, you might have been. And? What about it—?"

He thought he'd hear the man out, but Ares charges at him before he finished his sentence. The speed of the attack is terrific; it's immediately right in his face, and the sacred stone set into the hilt of Ares's holy sword gleams.

The Daughter of God and Serena, hmm?!

Tsking, he parries that strike, and then his opponent attacks from right above him.

"Sahra tells me I don't have to be any such thing."

His holy sword seems about to evaporate. Reinforcing it with magic, he blocks the strike. The impact sinks both of his feet into the ground.

"She says she liked me best when they called me the holy general and I defended the holy king's rule. It's wretched consolation, just the thing for a loser like me. However, at the same time, it was a relief. It made it all right to give up. I could give up—and just spend my days protecting Sahra."

The sacred stone gleams brighter and brighter, and the sword grows heavier as he blocks it.

"And so now I'm fighting to protect my wife."

"I see. My wife is watching, too." Ending the conversation bluntly, Claude blasts him with magic. Any ordinary human would have been burned to a cinder, but this man won't die. However, it drastically wears down the Daughter of God's restoration and Serena's reinforcement.

This is getting tiresome, so Claude slashes at him with a blade made of magic. Ares's eyes go wide. Claude pushes the man back, sending him flying, then immediately leaps after him and slaps him out of the air.

The ground rumbles, and Ares goes down. When the holy sword

falls from his hand, the light of the sacred stone has gone out.

“Master Clau—”

“Claaaaaaaaaaude! I was so worrieeeeeeed!”

His father cuts ahead of his wife and lunges at him. Dodging the man, he pulls his wife into an embrace. “Well? I’m strong, aren’t I?”

“Yes, yes you are— Erm, you haven’t killed him, have you?”

“He’s not dead.”

“That was pretty mean, don’t you think?!” Even though he’d stayed in hiding up until just now, Luciel dramatically takes offense.

Ignoring him, Claude drops a kiss onto Aileen’s eyelids. “Wait just a moment. It could still be dangerous.” Going over to the fallen Ares, who’s spreadeagled on the ground, he picks up the holy sword that’s lying next to the man. As he looks at the sacred stone in its hilt, his magic reacts by itself. In the same moment, Ares’s left leg begins to shine.

A summoning spell?!

With a heavy rumble, the entire ceremonial site sinks lower, and the floor abruptly begins reflecting the sunlight. It’s a mirror. The floor is turning into a mirror. Luciel is the first to react.

“A mirror of truth?! No—!”

“Caught yooooou.”

A woman’s sneering laugh echoes from beneath his feet.

“Father?!”

Luciel clutches at his head, obviously in pain. Briars of light creep up from below him, and he braces himself. This man’s strength equals or surpasses Claude’s; he’d never have believed he could be bound so easily.

“Master Claude!”

As always, his adviser is the first to run to him. Behind the man, he can see the mirror on the altar. It’s one the Queendom of Hausel brought in: a mirror said to show the truth.

How strange. For some reason, he can see his adviser dying in that mirror, stabbed through the chest.

Is it a past that should have been or a future that should be?

“Keith, stay back!”

Even as Claude screams, it comes true before his eyes. It happens so fast.

A briar of light pierces Keith’s chest, and he spits up blood. Behind him, the woman in the white bridal gown is laughing.

No, it’s him, in a rage, his hands bloodied— Yes, because he believed in him and was betrayed. Because the man laughed and said he’d done it for the money.

Keith falls forward, landing heavily. His blood spreads across the mirror.

Dazed, Claude looks down.
Below him—there's a black dragon.
"Claude, no, don't look! *Don't remember me!*"
Aileen.
The thought of his beloved wife fills his mind.

I love you. I really love you. It's funny. I never thought I'd love the demon king, of all people. The demons are precious, too. But humans are nothing to sneeze at, either, are we? After all, you fell for me. "The demon king's wife." I like the sound of that. It suits me better than "the Maid of the Sacred Sword."

My little sister's a hard worker. I've been worried that she's pushing herself, now that she's on her own, so this is perfect. If the Queendom of Hausel acknowledges this nation, I'm sure everything will work out for the better. We'll be able to make a land where demons and humans can live side by side. Even if it doesn't work now, in the future...

And so I'm going. Keep an eye on the demons and the children for me.

It's fine, I'll be home before you know it. Please don't look like that—Luciel.

"Ah."

The depths of his eyes blaze with heat.

"Ah."

Red...blood. The blood of his human wife, who believed and was betrayed.

Dark, dark red, dripping from her head, which was all that had come back to him.

I am the Maid of the Sacred Sword, a woman says, smiling with red-rouged lips.

"Ah, ah, aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

With a light cracking noise, the mirror, the shell over his memories, and his human skin all fall away.



Holding a scrap of paper to her chest, Rachel fights to get her breathing under control. She hasn't been sprinting, but her heart thuds away inside her.

Why, would a, thing like this, be here...? I must, tell, Lady Aileen...

The demons told her that Aileen is back. In any case, Claude said, "If I end up getting married, she'll probably storm back in a rage by our first night at the latest," so she'd actually thought that that was when they'd need to start worrying. She'd believed she was safe. She'd never questioned it.

She'd thought the reason she hadn't seen the members of the Oberon Trading Firm was because they also believed Aileen was fine, and they were busy getting ready for the Foundation Festival. She'd actually been worried about Serena, who'd vanished without obvious explanation.

How terribly carefree she'd been.

"You and I really aren't a good fit, huh."

She hears a *click* behind her head. It isn't a sound she's used to. However, there's a hard object pressed against the back of her skull, and she suspects it's the muzzle of a gun.

The curtains are closed, and the conference room in the old castle is gloomy. Light from outside streams in through the door, framing a lone shadow.

"I-Isaac...?"

"Did you find the draft of my strategy with the Queendom or something?"

"Wha...? What sort of strategy is this?" As she asks the question, she crushes the paper she's seen, crumpling it in her fist. The thing is a lie. Either that, or it's some sort of scheme. Yes, it's a trap to make their opponent careless.

A detailed map centered on Imperial Ellmeyer's ceremonial site. A troop deployment diagram. The number of necessary divine items. The number of holy swords. The predicted number of demons, plus details about them. A plan for dealing with them. The operation's start date and time. Isaac Lombard's signature, and the title *Commander of the Demon King Subjugation Operation*—None of it could possibly be true.

Why now, right when Lady Aileen is missing?

She trusts him, or she thinks she does, but her voice is trembling. "D-do the rest, know, about this...?"

"....."

"Answer me!"

Thinking she has to see his face, she turns around, only to find that she is indeed looking down the barrel of a gun. She gulps.

"She says even I can kill demons. This has more power than a sacred gun. I mean, sure it would. The Queendom of Hausel basically oversees the church. They've probably developed tons of tools that can kill demons better than sacred guns. They make holy swords, after all. I never thought they could do this much, but still." Isaac lowers

the gun, gazing at his hand. "Technology development really matters, doesn't it. I've reconsidered my position on that. Although, I mean, I'm a merchant, not a strategist."

"Wha...? What are you, talking about?"

"Do you know why Ellmeyer would lose if they went to war with Hausel now?"

Of course she doesn't. Forget winning or losing; she'd never even dreamed they might fight.

Isaac apparently meant it as a rhetorical question anyway. He goes on indifferently, "Because our next emperor is the demon king. Turning into a demon whenever something happens is way too much of a risk. Not only that, but if he becomes a demon, anyone who puts him down is automatically 'the good guy.' At that point, the empire's done for. Right?"

"B-but if Lady Aileen turns Prince Claude back into—"

"That means we'd be dependent on Aileen. All they'd have to do is get rid of the crown princess."

"Then...there's some reason for this, isn't there? It's to save Lady Aileen."

"You've got a little brother. I hear he's headed to Misha Academy soon."

"What?"

She looks him full in the face. Isaac's lips quirk up at the corners in an ironic smile. "They told me to turn traitor if I didn't want to watch your family be destroyed. I'm kind of a pushover, huh?"

"Wha—? What...are you...? What? Y-you can't mean, you've actually— Prince Claude..."

"I did it for you."

She gulps, searching his eyes to make sure he isn't lying, and then she realizes something.

It's the first time they've ever really made eye contact.

Up until now, they always averted their eyes, so neither noticed when the other was taking furtive glances at them.

"Wh-why...? Why would you, do a thing like... I—I never asked—!"

Casually, he reaches out and grasps the lily she's pinned on her chest. It's one of the lilies the Oberon Trading Firm—no, Isaac himself—prepared for the Foundation Festival.

He nonchalantly rips it away, crushing it in his hand.

Then he turns on his heel, walking over the scattered petals.

"W-wait, please, Isaac..."

It would have been better if what he'd just trampled on had been her love.

"Don't go."

If he'd been the sort of man those words could stop, she would never have fallen for him, and yet...

Sobbing, she sinks to the floor. With trembling hands, she scrapes together the dingy white petals, now marred with footprints.

There's no time to cry. She has to let the others know. She needs to take that paper and run straight to them.

But even if she gets to her feet, that stolen, scattered flower will never be the same again.

◆ Fifth Act ◆

In Short, the Villainess Is Fated to Lose

On the roof of the imperial castle's tallest clock tower, Lilia swings her legs idly, gazing at the scene below her.

On the condition that she wouldn't get in the way, Serena agreed to share some of her power with her. She categorically refused to let her lick up some of her blood, so Lilia told her, "In that case, develop the ability to share your power right now, or I'll kiss you, ready-set-go!" At that, Serena shared a trace amount of power with her from her palm—the girl was obviously capable if she tried—so for a little while, Lilia has the ability to see at great distances.

"Oh, but I wish I had two screens! What if I miss something amazing?!"

For now, she knows that watching the demon king is a sure bet, but what's going on elsewhere...?

Keith Eigrid's death is what triggered the demon king's transformation into a demon. Then she used the mirror of truth to show him the form of the Game 4 final boss and turn him into the ancient demon king, hmm? Hrrmm, she's used a brute-force move to set up the conditions for the Game 4 Queen ending... But the demon king's a demon now. How is she planning to use that to her advantage?

Claude was defeated in Game 1, then lost his memories and became human in the fan disc. Assuming Lilia didn't romance him then, and he retook Luciel's memories, one could say that Claude's fate is currently on the right course. However, if he's turned into a demon, even if he followed the Queen ending and went to take Amelia home, he'll end up sending her to heaven instead.

"Oh, but if the demon king reverts to human while he's possessed by his true form, he might become the Luciel from the Queen route... But how will she restore his humanity? It takes the sacred sword and the power of love to turn the demon king human again. Besides, why on earth does she look like that?"

Ever since retaking her memories of her previous life, she's had a rough idea of who that woman is. However, she doesn't have her motive pegged yet, and she can't be sure.

In the first place, if she's attempting to complete the Queen ending, it's strange that the woman hasn't tried to make contact with

her. By the logic she's using, Lilia Reinoise is the one who should have become the Maid of the Sacred Sword. However, when she grilled Serena about it, she was told that kidnapping her had only been a setup for kidnapping Aileen; Serena hadn't been ordered to do it.

Still, surely she won't keep ignoring me like this. After all, if her visions of the past and dreams of the future are in line with the game, then the Maid of the Sacred Sword is Lilia. She couldn't possibly use the heroines of Games 2 and 3 and leave me—

"Lady Lilia Reinoise."

There we go.

Lilia smiles to herself, then turns around and beams at the speaker. "Oh, Lady Grace Dark."

A woman in a bloodstained bridal gown is floating in midair. Come to think of it, has that adviser really died? It seems as if he was killed for no particular reason, just to act as a game flag that might not even have been necessary. *He seemed like he'd still be a useful character. What a waste. If she was going to do it, I wish she'd followed the actual story and had the demon king kill him. Talk about sloppy. I hate sloppy developments like this. Even if he lives, it's sloppy. She has no respect for the game. I guess she really is just a character whose only skills are predicting the future and seeing the past.*

As she's secretly grouching to herself, the woman's red lips move below her veil. "Crown Prince Claude has become the demon king."

"Oh no! Not my brother-in-law! How awful... What should we do?"

"Could you resurrect the sacred sword in order to slay him?"

"Of course I couldn't!" She puts on a startled expression, skimming over the fact that she's been calmly observing the situation from a commanding vantage point. "Besides, it will be fine even if I'm not there. After all, he has my sister-in-law! I'm sure Lady Aileen will return Prince Claude's humanity to him, using the sacred sword and the power of love!"

When she makes that declaration, hands clasped and eyes sparkling, the woman gives a small, scornful smile. Apparently she doesn't think Aileen can do it.

Aileen's sacred sword is half formed. Even if that information is based on the game, it does seem to be true. Did she decide that was the case because Aileen stole the sacred sword from Lilia?

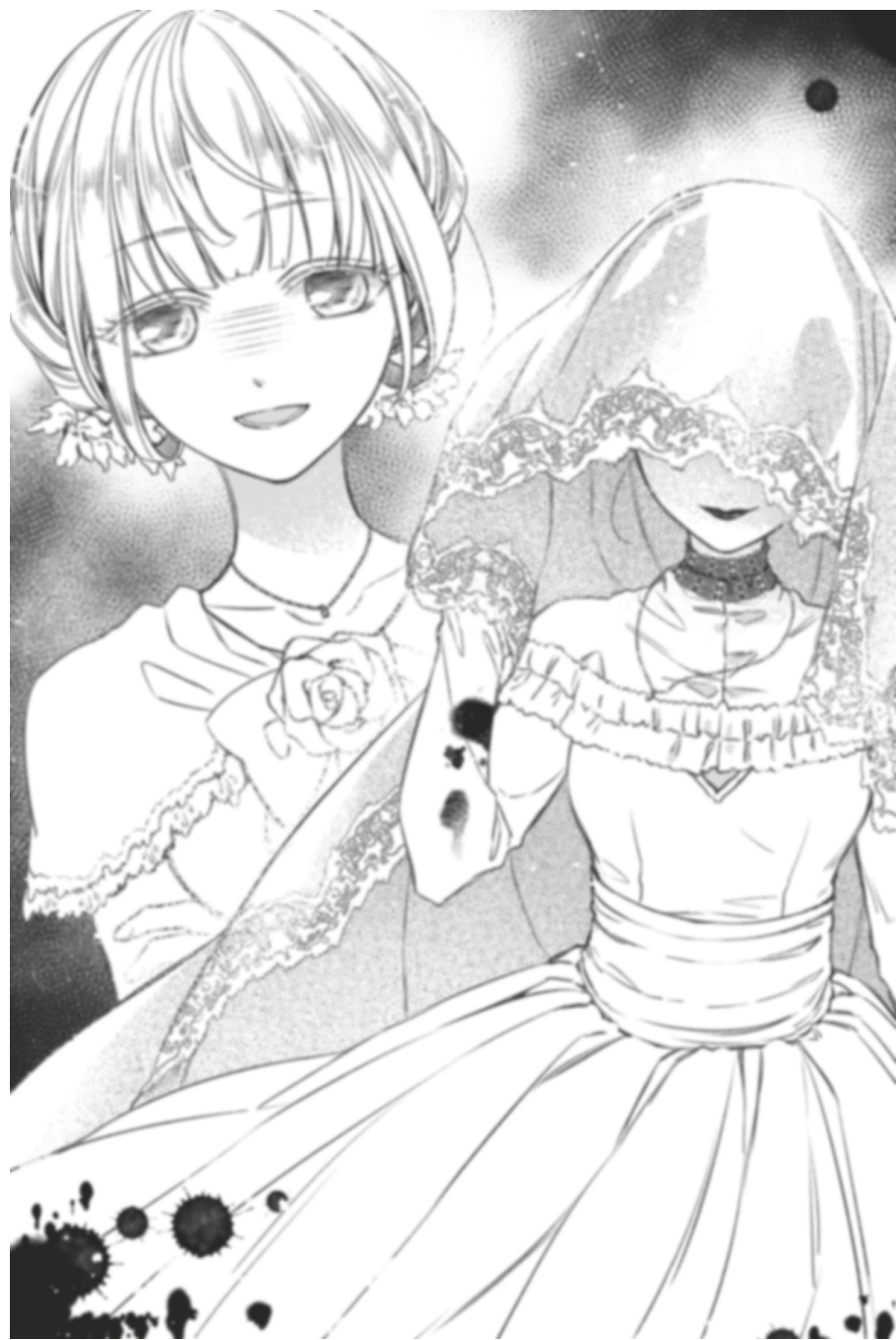
"Is that right? Then I recommend that you take shelter at once. It's dangerous."

"Thank you. You're very kind, Sister Grace."

"Sister?"

"Goodness, I'm sorry. You didn't actually manage to marry Prince Claude, did you."

“No, I didn’t. However, fate is continuing to work as it should.”



Responding indifferently to her sarcasm, the woman vanishes.

The holy king is supposed to be the only person in the entire world with sacred power who can teleport as if it were nothing. The scenario is weird. Neither Serena nor Sahra can do that. She and Aileen can't, either, and the past Maid of the Sacred Sword probably couldn't.

"Lilia! Th-there you are...!"

"Oh, Cedric. And Marcus."

Drat, they've found me.

Even though he's run all the way up to the clock tower's roof, Marcus looks fine. Cedric totters up after him; his shoulders are heaving, and he's trembling with anger. "I've told you, and told you, not to leave my side...!"

"Cedric, evacuating this place comes first. Lilia, come with us, and hurry. I don't want to alarm you, but it's possible that you may be targeted—by, erm, the Queendom of Hausel."

"Me? Why?"

"Lester suspects that the Queendom wants to demonstrate their authority through the holy sword, and that they may see the sacred sword as an obstacle. He thinks they might use this uproar to drag you away and dispose of you and the sword together."

"Of me? How?"

"The holy swords. We have reliable information that they've stockpiled too many of them to count. It's very likely that they'll slay the demon king and take advantage of the chaos to strike at you."

I see, she thinks, impressed. Viewed from that angle, she can see why the woman had asked if she'd use the sacred sword to fight the demon king. It also makes sense that she'd target Aileen, who actually does have a sword. If neither she nor Aileen uses the sacred sword to slay the demon king, then it will be the holy swords' turn. They've even provided a pretext for using them: The demon king turning into a demon is reason enough.

In fact, she and Aileen will be the ones who'll be blamed for failing to slay him.

"Fate is working as it should," hmm? And she's making reality follow suit.

Aileen once declared that, in reality, victory was hers. In that sense, should she revise her opinion of this woman as a sloppy character who can only dream of the future and see the past?

"I want you to behave yourself, Lilia."

"But then what will you do about the demon king? Will you kill him? Or leave it up to Lady Aileen? But they're after her as well, aren't they? Am I just supposed to stay quiet and simply watch that

unfold, too?" Lilia isn't planning to save her, but she asks the question anyway, just to be mean.

Marcus lowers his eyes. "...I can't discuss the details, but we have a plan. Now all we can do is pray it succeeds."

He can't discuss the details? Does that mean they've set some sort of trap? ...Using this development? Don't tell me they expected the demon king to become a demon.

Frankly, she's surprised that characters would come up with an answer like that, and that they're taking action on their own.

"All right. I won't wander off; I'll stay near you and Marcus, Cedric."

It's a reward. Deciding to stick with these two for a while, Lilia faces forward again.

Marcus nods, frowning. "Please do. Hey, Cedric, let's go. Our role is to protect Lilia."

"I—I kno—" Cedric is interrupted by a roar, and the ground shakes. The demon king is screaming.

"Brother," Cedric murmurs. He sounds as if he's swallowing something down, and it makes her look at him. Compared to the heroes of the sequels, Cedric really is just a prince. He doesn't have the strength to fight. The only reason he's there is to make Lilia Reinoise the Maid of the Sacred Sword.

"Cedric. Are you worried about Prince Claude?"

"No... I'm sure he'll be all right. He has Aileen."

Hmm, Lilia thinks. Her eyes go to the pitiful demon king character, who's become a full demon.

Strangely, she feels a trace of jealousy.

In the moment, the first thing Aileen did was smash the mirror beneath them. She stabbed the sacred sword down into it; cracks spread out from the blade, and when she poured power into it, the floating mirror turned into light and evaporated.

But Claude's transformation hasn't stopped.

Just as she's about to call his name, someone claps a hand over her mouth and whisks her into the audience seats.

"You're okay, sweet Ailey. Good."

"Walt! Send me back. Master Claude is—I!"

"No, cool your head a minute. Kyle, how's Master Keith?"

Those words bring her to her senses with a jolt. Kyle has brought Keith here, carrying him over his shoulder just as Walt carried her. He rips off a sleeve and starts trying to stanch the blood. "He's still breathing, but the bleeding won't stop. Unless we get him proper treatment quickly, he may not make it."

“I’ll teleport you to Luc. What shall we do with this?” Elefas has brought the unconscious Ares over to them.

Walt narrows his eyes. “It looks like he was used as the medium to summon that mirror a moment ago. Oh, they embedded a sacred stone in his left leg, huh? Our opponents sure do some gruesome stuff. I doubt that leg will work anymore. I think you could just toss him in with Master Keith.”

“We should probably tie him up, just in case... What’s happened to Master Luciel?”

“He’s currently restraining Master Claude.”

At Elefas’s words, Aileen leans forward. In the distance, in the center of the ceremonial site, there’s a terribly dense black vortex of magic where Claude should be. Occasionally, she hears a tense popping noise and glimpses a grotesque arm or leg.

Confronting that vortex head-on, red eyes glaring, is none other than Luciel. Every time the black vortex expands, he restrains it with a net of magic.

“Father...”

“However, I don’t think he’ll hold out for long. What would you like to do, Lady Aileen?”

When she hears that question, for the first time, she realizes she’s close to panicking. She puts her hands to her forehead, breathing deeply. *Calm down*, she tells herself silently over and over.

She is the demon king’s wife.

“...Elefas, take Master Keith and General Ares to Luc. Contact Isaac or James and ask for instructions. Those two will work out a plan for you. Walt and Kyle, you stay with me and— Brace yourselves, something’s coming!”

A black hole opens in the sky. It promptly expels a multitude of holy swords, which shine like comets.

As Aileen watches, wide-eyed, blades of light pour down on the ceremonial site. There’s a tremendous explosion, and Claude screams.

That’s the trigger.

The demon king’s magic swells up all at once. It feeds on his hatred of humans and his despair, then explodes. There’s a sound like a rope snapping; it’s probably Luciel’s net of magic.

“Master Claude!”

More holy swords have materialized in the sky, and magic streaks toward them, scattering blue sparks.

Strictly speaking, holy swords aren’t like the sacred sword. They don’t care who wields them, and they can harm humans as well. The fact that they can wound humans means that they aren’t made with sacred power alone. Unlike the sacred sword, while they lessen the force of magic, they don’t negate it entirely.

Losing to the overwhelming magic, all the holy swords are swept aside. The blast makes the blue sky blaze red, and a scorching wind spreads the black mist.

From the center of the jet-black area, a roar echoes.

“Master...Claude...”

He’s far bigger than the version she saw earlier. He’d only begun to transform that time. His black scales gleam, and his breath is like a crater on the verge of eruption.

His eyes are bloodred orbs, and they’re fixed directly on Aileen.

Shudder-inducing rage and murderous intent are focused on her.

“Elefas, go, hurry!” she shouts.

Elefas nods, then disappears with Keith and Ares.

The demon king’s tail sweeps in, smashing the audience seats in two.

Aileen throws herself to the side, evading. She bites her lip. She’s sure their eyes met just now, and then he attacked. In other words, Claude sees her as the enemy.

I’ll return him to his senses even if I have to hit him!

Converting her determination into the sacred sword, she gets a firmer grip on it. *This won’t do. I’ll kill him. I have to add magic—* And that’s when she realizes she still hasn’t fully grasped her situation.

Claude’s magic is gone. There’s no response from either her ring or her shadow.

“Walt! Kyle! Be careful! We can’t use Master Claude’s magic!”

Even as she warns them, more holy swords appear overhead and rain down. They’re falling over a wide area this time. *Tsking*, Aileen strikes down the ones that plunge toward her.

Unless they do something about these persistent attacks, they won’t be able to get near Claude. Worse, the attacks will stir up Claude’s anger, and then they’ll never get this under control.

Who’s doing this, and where are they?! But I mustn’t leave Master Claude now—

The sky flashes in another direction. *Again?!* She braces herself, then realizes the target is different this time.

It’s the old castle. The demons’ precious castle, which Claude protects.

With a howl, Claude spits out an enormous mass of magic. It envelops the attack as it bears down on the old castle, burning it all away.

However, that wasn’t an isolated attack. Claude’s eyes blaze with anger, and he turns toward the old castle.

“Master Claude, wait! It may be a trap—”

Drowning out her voice, the assault on the old castle continues. If even one strike gets through, weak demons like Almond will be

vaporized instantly. Even if they don't have as much force as the sacred sword, these are holy swords. She can't believe the Queendom is squandering them like this.

Oh, I see! It's because they have Sahra and Serena...!

If Sahra and Serena are both there, they can replenish, repair, and reinforce the holy swords all they want. It's a strategy built on material superiority, and it's terrifyingly correct. Not only that, but they've anticipated what Claude will do. This can't have been that woman's plan; these attacks are nothing like her previous methods. Who on earth is issuing the orders? Aileen feels like grinding her teeth.

While she's thinking, Claude unfurls his wings and takes flight.

"Walt, Kyle, after him!"

"Don't. You'll get killed." As Aileen and the others break into a run, Luciel bars their way. A trickle of blood is flowing from one of his red eyes, like a tear. "He can't hear you now. He won't know you. You've borrowed his magic, so I'm sure you can tell: He doesn't think of you as allies anymore. He won't protect you."

Walt and Kyle gulp. Aileen clenches her fists. "Get out of our way, Father."

"I'm taking him back to the demon realm. I'll at least do that much."

"I am asking you to get out of the way. Can't you hear me?"

"He's not himself anymore! The true form has swallowed his mind. He's just a monster—"

What he's saying is completely uncalled for, and Aileen slams a fist into his mouth. She's put all her force behind the blow, and the sheer violence of it knocks Luciel into the ground. Her knuckles ache dully. Shaking her hand, Aileen speaks to him coldly. "I'm in a hurry, so if you'll excuse me."

"Wha...? You seriously punched me?! She hit me for real. I swear, what kind of daughter-in-law...?"

"I have never once thought I simply wanted Master Claude to protect me!!"

Claude always protected her. She was glad. It made her happy. However, she never wanted him to be the one who did all the protecting in their relationship.

"He doesn't know me? No, I would imagine he doesn't. It's happened before. This is the second time. At this point, all I can think is, *Again?*"

"A-again?"

"Don't underestimate the demon king's wife."

Luciel is staring up at her, stunned, from his spot on the ground. Behind her, Walt smiles wryly. "...Yeah, I figured that's how this

would go.”

“But what are you actually going to do? If you go in without a plan, you’ll die; I’m not joking.”

“My plan is the power of love, obviously. I’ll use anything, even cheats.”

The truth is that she’s frightened. After all, Claude has attacked her. Before now, no matter how disgusted or angry he got, even when he’d lost his memories, he never tried to swat her away like an insect. Even at their first meeting, he’d been kind.

As Luciel says, that probably isn’t Claude anymore. Because she loves him, she knows this.

However, because she does love him, she can stand and fight.

When she takes her first step, the ground writhes again. It’s just at the entrance to the ceremonial site.

The pale soldiers, which she’s already sick of seeing, squirm into view. They’re probably meant to pin them in place.

What daring, precise countermeasures this opponent of theirs has arranged...

“Walt and Kyle, let’s go.”

Aileen gets a better grip on her sword, and Walt and Kyle both keep their weapons at the ready.

Carrying Keith and Ares, Elefas teleports into Luc and Quartz’s combination laboratory and clinic in the old castle. The scent of disinfectant makes his nose prickle. The moment he appears, he blinks. “Wh-what’s the matter? Everyone’s here.”

“Oh, Elefas— What, Keith?! And...”

Denis looks as if he’s wondering, *Who’s that?* Luc and Quartz weren’t part of the group that infiltrated the Kingdom of Ashmael, so they don’t recognize Ares, either. As a matter of fact, Elefas doesn’t know the details himself, for the same reason. Jasper reacts, though. “Ashmael’s holy general? What’s he doing here, all beat up?”

“I don’t really understand it, but he’s a suspect. I’ve bound him. More importantly, Master Keith—”

“This way, please.” The figure who stands up isn’t Luc, but Rachel. Her eyes are red and swollen. That concerns him, but treating Keith comes first. While he lays the man down on the bed, Luc and Quartz cleanse their hands in a washtub Rachel has prepared, disinfecting them.

“This is the demon king’s right-hand man. Why hasn’t the demon king healed him?”

“Because Prince Claude has, erm, turned into a demon.”

The magic Elefas borrowed from Claude has disappeared, so he

can't use that almighty power, either. As he falters, Luc puts on a mask, then peers into the wound. "The first aid was done perfectly. I don't see any foreign material, either. I'll have to sew this up, though."

"Huh? Sew?"

"It's all right; I've been practicing on corpses from the time I was small. Quartz, help me prep."

"...Can you numb him up? We can't let him thrash."

From behind Elefas, Quartz makes a laconic request. Realizing that he's asking him to use his own magic, Elefas nods. "I can manage that much... You want him unable to move or feel pain, correct?"

"That's right. It only needs to last for a day. Please do the same to that general fellow. Then leave the rest to us and step outside. Denis, Jasper, you too."

After casting the same spell on Keith and Ares, Elefas turns to leave the room. On his way, he looks at Rachel again. She usually stands unobtrusively behind Aileen; however, his impression of her was that she always held her head high and performed her duties skillfully. The nervous strain she's showing gives him a very bad feeling.

In the hall outside the clinic, his premonition proves to be correct.

"Young Master Isaac had this."

He looks at the crumpled document Jasper's held out to him, then at Rachel's face. Even so, he says the words aloud. "So he's betrayed us."

"That's about the size of it. This is Young Master Isaac, though, so it's hard to say. He may have double-crossed them and just made it convincingly look like he's sold us out."

"We should act on the assumption that he's actually betrayed us."

He's the one whose betrayal would hurt them the most. Isaac knows every last detail about their internal affairs. For that very reason, Elefas declares that they should get rid of any optimistic fantasies about his betraying the enemy instead. "No doubt it's painful, but this sort of thing happens frequently. Have the demons been—?"

"We told them. None of them really seemed to believe us, though."

"There was a fortress Isaac was interested in. We're having them scout it out. Earlier, he said that anyone who wanted to attack the demon king's castle would do it from there."

"If you find him, tell me at once. I'll teleport in and kill him."

Everyone looks at him. He doesn't find it unbearably awkward. This is the best possible move. If he leaves it to someone else, either Isaac will cleverly evade them, or they'll hold back out of pity. That's

why he's volunteered.

He doesn't care if they call him heartless. It's nothing new. However, the abuse he's expecting doesn't come.

"You've had it rough, huh. Your Uncle Jasper feels for you."

"...What?"

"Come to think of it, Isaac complimented you, Elefas. He said it was incredible the way you'd done all that groundwork and cornered the demon king so thoroughly, all by yourself. In that case, we should have you come up with the plan, huh!"

"I won't show him mercy because he praised me. Listen, if we intend to beat him in a battle of wits—"

"By the way, do you know what Young Master Isaac misreads the most?"

Is there any such thing? Elefas frowns, and Jasper throws an arm around his shoulders.

"Women's hearts."

"...I see."

"Yeah, seriously, women's hearts are the one thing he just can't get a handle on! Me and Jasper and Luc and Quartz all agree on that! Any move he makes backfires; we've seen it happen over and over. So, Rachel: Do you think Isaac's sold us out?"

"No," she says without hesitating.

Her eyes are red and swollen, but she's wearing something like a smile.

"He'd never betray Lady Aileen."

"B-but..."

"He said he was threatened. They asked him if he didn't care what happened to my family. He told me that's why he helped them and why he betrayed us... As if that could ever happen!" Clenching her fists, scattering tears, Rachel looks up. "He'd never betray Lady Aileen for my sake. If he thinks I'll get the wrong idea because he said he turned traitor for me, he can think again!!"

Rachel breathes heavily, shoulders heaving. Then she finishes, resolutely. "...And so he hasn't betrayed us. He's only pretending he has."

"—What? But, erm, if Isaac genuinely has betrayed us, then the poor fellow... I mean, he did it for your sake, correct?"

"As I said, he isn't the sort of person who'd betray Lady Aileen for me!"

Are her eyes filled with tears because she thinks he's chosen another woman over her?

Elefas understands that part, but he turns to Jasper anyway. The man's shoulders are shaking. "Um, is this all right...?"

"Y-yeah, it's fine. So, see, we've decided to go with Rachel's

opinion.”

There’s no rhyme or reason to that, he thinks, but it might be a good idea. In any case, when it comes to reading minds, their opponent is indisputably better at it. *If he’s left us, since both Lady Aileen and Prince Claude are away, James or Keith will be the ones in charge of giving orders. If he’s already assumed that Keith will be incapacitated, then it’s down to James. However, James is a cambion, and since Prince Claude’s demonic transformation is doubtless part of their plan, there’s no telling how long he’ll keep his sanity. In that case, I’ll be the only one left... No doubt he’s predicted that much.*

He’s spent a long time plotting and skillfully mobilizing others, all by himself. There’s no way Isaac has forgotten that. He’s probably also anticipated that Elefas’s plans will center on disposing of him. He exhales.

“Very well. Whether or not he’s betrayed us, if we intend to outwit him, we should adopt the opinions of someone besides myself.”

“Hey, Denis.” Kicking through the window, Beelzebuth appears. It’s quite the dramatic entrance. “The giant moles say humans have been milling around inside the fortress. It sounds like that mushroom head is there, too.”

“Um, you still have your sanity?” It’s a very direct question, and the demon stares at him. As if making excuses for himself, he elaborates. “Prince Claude has become a demon, so...”

“Yes, our king is as magnificent as ever today. Behold, human.” Beelzebuth points proudly at the sky. The objects that materialize there are—holy swords.

Before Elefas’s shocked eyes, a tremendous blast of magic sweeps them away. Needless to say, its source is probably the demon king.

“He’s in fine form!”

He’s in such good shape that he seems likely to destroy the world, but, well, that’s a human issue.

“...Yes, I see. As far as you and the other demons are concerned, the demon king is still the demon king.”

“He seems to be in pain, though. We must help him.”

He’s startled. As a rule, demons lose themselves in the mind of the demon king. If the demon king is angry, so are they. Frankly, he’s been concerned that all the demons here may turn against them.

It can’t be the result of Lady Aileen’s conditioning... No-no, we can’t afford to have me start thinking like that. —Oh, is it because Master Luciel is here?

Claude has been taken over, but the true form’s mind is split. That’s why the demons are managing to stay as they are. In that case, James will be in his right mind, too.

It isn’t too late. He’s beginning to feel there’s hope. He’s so

optimistic that even he thinks it's ridiculous.

"If I recall, according to Isaac's lectures, when someone engages us in a battle of attrition, we should strike as soon as possible. Correct?"

"That's right. At times like that, I was given permission to incinerate them with maximum firepower!"

"U-um, Luc and Quartz gave me various things to hang on to! There's a medicine that will inflict permanent insanity, see? And one that will send you blissfully to heaven— Oh, and if we spread this around, even grass won't grow for several decades, so they said to be careful with it."

"Please put those away, that's scary. All right, let's have the demon king protect this place, and we'll strike. It's our only option anyway... Listen." Elefas scans the entire group. "I can't come up with a strategy that will let us outwit Isaac. Since that's so, we'll do as we were taught, faithfully. In exchange, let's harass him. Yes, by all means, let's hit him with the worst possible harassment. If we do that, I'm confident we can win."

"Hey, that's a great smile."

"And when we win, I'll have Isaac learn the Demon King Love-Love Dance."

Somebody mutters, "Fiend of a mage," but he smiles and pretends he hasn't heard.

One second past the appointed time, Baal stands up. "She's late. We are under no obligation to wait. We'll take our leave."

The door guard and the woman who's been serving him look his way with unfocused eyes. They aren't living humans. They're dolls—sacred items powered by sacred stones.

The long, narrow room is hushed and chilly. Most would never think this was the palace of the world-renowned Queendom of Hausel. It makes him feel as if he may be the only living thing here.

However, his opponent can probably hear him perfectly well in this place.

The holy king responded to the summons in person, intending to strike a deal regarding the disappearance of the Daughter of God and her husband. However, if this is how things stand, nothing good is likely to come of it. If necessary, he planned to negotiate with the diary Ares had hidden as his trump card, but apparently he miscalculated.

"If our return is delayed, our wife will worry. No need to escort us, we'll show ourselves—"

As he steps away from his chair, tentacles of light reach out from

it.

Even as his eyes widen, they trap him and pull him back to his seat. It's a classic binding spell. Ordinarily, he could have broken it down in the blink of an eye—but it doesn't budge.

"Please, sit," the serving woman says in a grating voice.

"There is something...we wish to...show you." The guard brings a full-length mirror over and sets it in front of Baal.

It doesn't reflect him, though. It shows something much more ominous.

He's never seen this demon before, so why does it strike him as familiar? A cold, distant sensation spreads through his heart, along with the anger. He always thought this was a risk. *The fool. This is why we told him to take good care of that earring.*

At this point, there's no telling whether the earring he gave him even exists.

"Remain seated...until it is over."

"...On the contrary, shouldn't you release us if a thing like this is happening?"

"You and...the demon king...are friends."

Friends. I see. We're friends, are we? He laughs at himself. "We aren't spineless enough to misjudge the situation because of that."

In addition to the demon king, the mirror shows the attack that's trained on him: a volley of holy swords.

If something like that were turned on his country, there would be no telling how long even Baal's barrier would last.

"Think...carefully. Consider the future...of the Kingdom of Ashmael."

"There's no need to tell us that." Sitting back in the chair, Baal looks at the mirror. Apparently the other party wants him to be a spectator. It's irritating, but undoing the binding spell will be no easy task. Even if he freed himself, what could he do? That holy sword offensive is a check on the entire world, himself included.

Do something about this. Show us. Demon king's servants—Aileen.

The beautiful castle of demons, which he'd hoped to use as his villa, is gradually being destroyed. As he gazes at the sight, he slowly squeezes his hands into fists.

The old castle and imperial castle form two corners of a triangle. In the third corner, to the south, lies an old fortress. Thirty years ago, it was used for surveillance and defense. However, when the demon king withdrew into the forest, the forest took over the fortress's role. After the nonaggression pact, it had been abandoned so as not to antagonize the demons.

The fortress has a sweeping view of the old castle and the demon king's forest. Thinking that if someone were going to use it, it would be better if that someone was them, he'd had Denis redesign it. Who'd have believed he'd end up using it like this? Life was funny that way.

"How does it look?"

The woman materialized without a sound, and Isaac narrows his eyes. She's still in her bridal gown. Red— Is that Keith's blood? According to this woman, Keith was supposed to die. He's one of the keys to turning the demon king into a demon.

"All according to plan. Couldn't be better."

"I see. The members of the Danis family are all well."

"That's great. How about your end? You got the holy king pinned down, right?"

"Yes. With Serena's power, it was a simple matter."

"Oh yeah?" he says absently. Internally, he sighs. That girl really is dangerous.

"Still, it was impressive of you to think of wiping out all the demons along with their king."

Sarcasm? —No, it probably isn't. It's hard to read emotions in this woman's voice.

"If you want greater fame than the sacred sword, it's necessary. Not only that, but these weapons work on humans, too. If you're stingy with them and give a lackluster demonstration, you'll only make yourself more enemies."

Anyone who's watching from even a slightly raised vantage point will be able to see this. Word that the Queendom of Hausel is attempting to subjugate the demon king using holy swords will be spreading like wildfire. Because of the Foundation Festival, distinguished guests from other lands are also here.

The power that is overwhelming the demon king will be a threat to humans as well.

If the Queendom has all this power, no country will attempt to defy it.

"Hausel has kept all this firepower under wraps all this time, just for today, right? Don't be a miser; go big with it. This is a debut performance."

"...That, that's right."

A trace of emotion steals into the woman's tone. He can't quite tell whether it's a scornful smile or delight. "However, I will have Lady Sahra and Lady Serena withdraw. No doubt the holy swords alone will be enough to end this. I see no need to retrieve and replenish spent swords."

"No, don't do that yet. We need to brace for the demons' counterstrike."

“Counterstrike? The old castle is under attack; they couldn’t do a thing like—”

“Look at that, and if you can still talk that way, go right ahead.”

If they don’t do something about the holy swords, this will turn into a battle of attrition. That’s what they must be thinking. It’s how he taught them to think.

Have the weaker demons reconnoiter, carry messages, and gather intel. Put together a plan. Analyze the enemy’s information, figure out where you need to strike. When you do it, make it a surprise attack and crush them all at once with maximum firepower.

They haven’t managed a surprise attack, but there’s probably no help for that. We struck first.

This is the right answer, though. Granted, none of it has surpassed his predictions, but still.

“As planned, everybody scatters. Hey, you and I are headed to the demon king. Take us there.”

“I gave you a sacred stone so you could teleport. Where is it?”

“Look, shut up already; I’m a normal human over here. I already used it to get away from the old castle. Forget that, just come with me. We’re going to finish off the demon king.”

With most of her face still hidden by her veil, the woman nods quietly.

“Don’t quit attacking the old castle. The weaker demons will be hiding in there. As long as you keep up the assault, the demon king won’t move.”

“...Then what are the demons who are heading this way?”

“Well, they’ve probably realized we’re conducting a battle of attrition. Of course they’d come.”

The vanguard is the demon king’s vaunted air force. Those are the ones he taught to salute. After them come the fenrirs and other demons who fight on the ground.

Come on, bring it. He gazes straight at them.

“Isaac sighted!”

“Apprehend him! Torture, torture! Time for the Demon King Love-Love Dance punishment!”

“Begin assault!”

The royal exam candidates only pretended to return home, and they’ve been waiting on the border. The suspicious powder the milling crows scatter sends the group crashing into a pandemonium of sneezing and tears. Holy power isn’t very good at dispersing stuff like that.

“Isaac, we’ll roll you up in a reed mat!”

“Torture, torture!”

If they’re aiming to turn this around with one blow, they’ll take

out the strategist-commander. Their goal is right on the mark, too.

Oooh, scary, Isaac thinks. He promptly retreats into the fortress. The bloodstained bride seems stunned, and he calls to her, “Hey, if you stay there, you’ll die. The second-strongest demon is gonna show up.”

“How dare you betray us, human!”

Man, he’s already here. Isaac ducks back inside. Even as he does it, the top of the tower is incinerated. It’s Beelzebuth, who’s rumored to be second only to the demon king in terms of strength.

“Come out! Rachel is crying!”

Not only that, but he’s using psychological warfare. He’s really grown.

“What if she won’t make us sweets anymore?!”

Apparently it wasn’t psychological warfare. While Isaac’s still exasperated, the woman materializes right in front of him. She holds out her right hand. Guessing she intends to teleport them, Isaac nods and takes it.

The woman’s hand begins to glow from the inside. It’s a miracle he’s witnessed several times already.

James went after Serena and Sahra. Good luck against those women. —That’s nine times.

Counting the noises that reverberate through the sky, Isaac closes his eyes.

When he opens them again, the demon king is right there. As they look down at him from the very top of the old castle, he’s spitting magic right and left, as if he’s breathing fire.

“...I’m seriously trying to slay that? I must be out of my mind.”

“What? Are you suggesting we call the operation off now?”

“Of course not.”

“Master Claude!”

That’s just like her: She got here earlier than he’d predicted. Well, it’s all the same, though.

Aileen looks at him, eyes wide. Isaac gives a wry smile. *Okay. Game on.*

He’ll pull the trigger, betting everything on this moment.

The demons are burning the fortress. Auguste picks up Serena’s presence in an abandoned garden, a short distance away from it. Two women look up, startled. One is Serena, as expected; the other is—the Daughter of God. The girl who ran off because she didn’t want to die—the one who’s gone missing.

Why is she with Serena? The question crosses his mind, but talking to them comes first.

When Serena sees him, she grabs Sahra's hand and takes off. She's going to get away.

"Sere—"

Flames blast in from the opposite direction, instantly transforming the garden into a sea of fire. Auguste stops in his tracks and looks up at his friend, who's floating in midair. "James..."

"You came to capture that woman, didn't you? Let's go."

"Wait— Wait just a minute, James!"

Serena and the other girl have fled into the forest, and James flies after them. The cambion glances his way briefly; his eyes are a dreadfully cold red. Wings have grown from his back. He's turned demon.

If he feels like it, he won't have any trouble tearing Serena apart with those claws.

Biting his lip, Auguste breaks into a run. Serena and Sahra's backs are far away. First things first: He has to catch up to them.

However, James's magic blows the trees away. He hasn't left him with a moment to spare.

Turning the ground ahead of the girls into a blasted wasteland, James touches down. "What were you doing?" he says quietly. "What were you after? You will tell me everything."

"M-Miss Serena...i-is that...a demon?"

"That's right. You get it, don't you! Out of the way, cambion." Serena slashes at James. The blade she's holding is probably a holy sword.

James evades, moving as little as possible. His lips curve. "Did you imagine you could cut me with skills like yours?"

"Mm, good point. That's too bad."

"Um, I'm sorry!" Sahra says. She's circled around behind James. The woman hadn't seemed capable of using a weapon, but a whirlwind springs from her hands. To humans, it's a gentle, healing power.

However, James is half demon, and to him, it's poison.

He totters, covering his mouth. Mercilessly sending him flying with a kick, Serena grabs Sahra's hand. "Come on, let's go!"

"A-all right."

James is stunned for a moment, but it's going to take more than that to stop him. Finally catching up, Auguste draws his sword. "No! Serena, behind you!"

Claws strike at her back, but Auguste catches them on his sword.

James's eyes widen, and then they fill with a terrible rage. "Auguste, you—!"

With a crackle, sparks of magic scatter in front of him. His sword is reinforced with James's magic, and it begins to melt.

Auguste draws a deep breath, then relaxes, letting his stance come apart. At the same time, he swings his sword. Its tip traces a half circle and James dodges, putting some distance between them.

Tossing his ruined sword away, Auguste steps in front of Serena, shielding her. "Serena, let me borrow that sword. I can't hold back against James."

"...Huh?" After a moment's delay, Serena reacts. He takes the sword from her hands. As he suspected, it's a holy sword.

If he has this, he'll be able to fight James on equal terms, even without magical assistance.

"Hurry and get away from here."

"Wh-what... What are you talking about?"

"Go!"

"What do you think you're doing, Auguste?!" James has come after him, and he catches his claws on the holy sword. There's a burst of magic, and sparks scatter. Clicking his tongue, James unleashes a kick at his head. Auguste dodges, then thrusts the sword at his opponent's unguarded chest. Catching the sword bare-handed, James shouts at him, "Enough of this nonsense! Do you mean to betray us for that woman?!"

The pressure grows, and the ground sinks under him. A blast wind rages, scattering his sweat and tearing at his clothes. "Do you understand the situation? Look at what's happened to the king!"

He knows. He saw it all on his way here: the attacks on the old castle, and the demon king who's become a demon.

"That woman is involved! And you'd—"

"I know! I know, so I'll stop her. After all, the demon king's going to become emperor. Ailey said so!" He gets a better grip on the holy sword, to keep James's magic from overpowering him. "I believe her, so I'm protecting Serena!"

There has to be some reason for this. He believes there is, and so...

"Don't split hairs!"

"Why are you fighting the cambion just like that woman said?!"

A shock runs through him but not from the front. It hits him from behind.

As James stares, stunned, Auguste topples forward, collapsing to the ground.

"I thought you were going to make a success of yourself."

Serena is standing there, holding a rock in both hands. Apparently she just hit him with it. Beside her, Sahra is dithering. "U-um, wasn't he...trying to save us...?"

"He's just an idiot. Hey, you, listen to me: Weren't you going to make a success of yourself?"

“Huh?!”

Serena tosses the rock away and hauls him up by his shirtfront. “Success. You’re succeeding, right? Because that’s what you said.”

“Oh, yes... I—I think I said that, maybe. I’m not really sure...”

“You said it. So why are you selling out the demon king?! Are you stupid? The demon king’s the next emperor, and you’re one of the knights under his direct command! Or—” Serena points at James, who’s standing there with his mouth hanging open, and he flinches. “Are you telling me to seduce the cambion or something?! That’s not even funny; he’s half demon! Even if it won me Mirchetta, life would obviously be rough!”

“Huh?! Um, what are you talking—?”

“I’m talking about my future! For the same reason, those guards won’t do! There’s no telling whether humans reinforced with demon snuff can have proper children!”

“Ch-ch-children?”

“The mage may make a success of himself, too, but he’s out as well; his relatives have too much baggage!”

“H-his relatives...?”

“You were the only proper human here, and the one who was most likely to succeed, so what are you doing?!”

Auguste sits on the ground, dazed; Serena’s still holding on to the front of his shirt.



“Um...” Beside them, Sahra speaks up. “You’re Auguste? Are you interested in being a Holy Knight, or a hero, or anything like that?”

“Huh...? N-no, not particularly.”

“I—I see. That’s good. Men tend to aspire to titles, and then they stop thinking about their families... I think they’re most dashing when they do their work properly and come back home, without thinking of unnecessary things. That’s the greatest happiness there is.”

Coming from a woman whose husband started an insurrection and was subsequently branded a criminal, those words carry serious weight.

Sighing, Serena shoves Auguste away. “Let’s go, Sahra.”

“Oh, yes. We’ll hurry. Um, I’m sorry I can’t heal that bump on your head.”

“Just leave him. He’s tough.”

“Wait— Serena! So what are you actually doing, then? You haven’t betrayed us, have you?!” He still isn’t sure if *betrayed* is really the right word, but he asks anyway. “I’m dumb, so I won’t understand unless you tell me; I’ve always been like that...! So tell me, please! Whatever you say, I’ll believe it.”

Serena turns back slightly. “Succeed.”

“No, that’s not, I wasn’t talking about success or anything...!”

“I’m going to succeed, too: I’ll put that woman solidly in my debt. I’ll regain control of the Gilbert family and win myself the sort of position anyone would envy. Once I do, no one will laugh and say the wife of the captain of the Holy Knights is a lowborn nobody who comes from nothing.”

She turns her back on him with a sharp flourish.

Still, he’s sure the flushed cheeks and ears he glimpsed weren’t wishful thinking.

The women run off, and then all that’s left is a landscape that’s been destroyed for nothing.

“Huh? The wife of the captain of the Holy Knights? Then ‘success’ means she and I will...”

Behind him, James sighs, and he flinches.

“Incidentally, I’m currently the confidant of the next emperor, on friendly terms with Prime Minister d’Autriche, and one day I’ll rule Mirchetta. You may belong to the Holy Knights, but you’re still a grunt. I can shuffle personnel at that level.”

“...U-um. James, I’m sorry about—”

“You’re demoted.”

With a brilliant smile, his friend hands down a merciless declaration.

“Hey, that’s Isaac...isn’t it?”

“Why’s he with that woman?”

Walt and Kyle have caught up to her. Aileen takes a deep breath while thinking of two possible explanations: Either Isaac has betrayed them, or he’s pretending he has. However, before she can worry about that, Claude roars. As if in response, Isaac smiles ironically. “Below.”

She understands that it’s an order only after the ground around the old castle begins to shine.

As the holy swords emerge from the ground, Claude flaps his wings, rising into the air. He starts to attack, but then changes his mind. He swings his tail through instead, slapping the swords down, and the ones he doesn’t catch pierce the fragile membranes of his wings. He screams.

“Master Claude!”

“Why?! Is he out of magic?!”

“No, the demons are down there!”

Demons who aren’t suited to combat will have taken shelter underground. That means Claude can’t attack the ground under the old castle.

“Below, plus diagonally above him, in front and behind. Aim for his leg joints and wings.”

As Isaac gives the order, the woman’s right hand glows. Once more, holy swords emerge below Claude. At the same time, the blades appear in the air, before and behind him. *Tsking*, Walt and Kyle start paring away the ground-based attacks, but it’s nowhere near enough.

“Beelzebuth! He isn’t here?!”

“Nope, he’s busy over there, burning down the fortress.” Even though they’re far apart, Isaac’s voice carries very clearly. “Even if he were here, he’d get run through with a holy sword and that would be it. I mean, look, even the demon king can’t cope with this.”

Claude screams. He hasn’t been able to field all the attacks, and his wings have been pierced.

“Master Claude! —Isaac, do you seriously mean to kill him?!”

“Now slap him down from above.”

The demon king falls to earth. A great hole opens in the sky, and holy swords pour down.

Claude can’t get up. Aileen flings herself onto his huge body. His eyes are dyed red with the urge to kill; she smiles into them brightly. “Wait just a moment, Master Claude.”

It’s a surface attack, a haphazard one that doesn’t care what it hits. She can’t have them thinking she’ll flinch at something like that.

Sacred sword flashing, she leaps into the rain of holy swords, blowing away the blades that are flying toward Claude with a single stroke. Then she cuts down the swords that have slipped through one

by one, making them explode.

“Ailey, incoming!”

A hole opens above them again. Looking up, Aileen shifts to a reverse grip on the sacred sword. Then she hurls the shining blade at the hole from which the holy swords are being summoned.

Beyond the sky, something explodes. Pulled into the explosion, the holy swords crumble into fragments.

“...Sh-she attacked the source directly? That was epic.”

“We can only hope that ruined all the holy swords they have in storage...”

“Master Claude!” Ignoring her amazed guards, Aileen nuzzles her cheek against Claude’s nose. “It’s me. Your wife. Do you recognize me?”

Claude’s eyes move. Realizing he’s looking at the sacred sword, Aileen smiles. “It’s all right. I won’t attack you. I am your wife, after all. Listen, return to normal soon, won’t you? You’re quite dashing in this form as well, but unlike Master Baal, I’m not prepared to wed you in that state—”

Sensing a rush of murderous hostility behind her, she turns. The woman in the bridal gown is holding a sword at the ready.

“Lady Grace...!”

“Hee-hee. It would have been fine if the holy swords had killed you, but...I suppose you are the Maid of the Cursed Sword, even if you aren’t much of one.”

She wields the blade with such skill that her previous trim appearance seems like a lie. Not only that, but her weapon is—

A holy sword— No, the sacred sword?!

“It’s quite sad, though. No matter how she struggles, the Maid of the Cursed Sword can’t become the Maid of the Sacred Sword.”

Aileen’s eyes widen. Their blades have locked, and her sword is dimming before her eyes. The other woman’s sacred sword is draining it. “Why...?”

“This is the real sacred sword, you know. It’s only natural.” The woman strikes her sword away, knocking it to the ground. Walt and Kyle try to launch a follow-up attack on the woman, but she sends them flying. “Did you imagine you could win with an imitation?”

The woman’s right hand gleams. More holy swords are on their way. Apparently that hadn’t been the end of them. She looks up at Isaac, and he responds coldly, “Having an emergency supply is one of the basics.”

In that case, she’ll just destroy their spares as well. Digging her fingers into the dirt, she gets to her feet. Then, as before, she flings the sacred sword.

She’s thrown it with all her might, but the woman catches it one-

handed.

“Wha...?”

As Aileen stares, stunned, the woman opens her red lips and shoves the sacred sword between them.

Walt and Kyle have gotten back up as well. Seeing what she’s seeing, they clap their hands over their mouths.

“Th-that woman...”

“The sacred sword... She ate—”

Her red tongue flicks across her lips. At the same time, holy swords pour down.

“Farewell, Aileen Lauren d’Autriche.”

Her sacred sword is gone. Without that sword, Aileen is nothing more than the daughter of a duke. She isn’t the demon king’s wife or the crown princess. Only a villainess.

A mere villainess who’ll be pulled into the battle between the demon king and the Maid of the Sacred Sword and casually killed off.

Heat lances through her right shoulder. Pain follows. She screams and Claude roars; he’s been pierced by the holy swords.

No! Master Claude—

She can’t speak. What is the stuff that’s trickling down her cheeks? Are these tears?

“I’ve done it! Finally, finally my wish will come true! Now I’m the one and only Maid of the Sacred Sword! Aaah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

If only the woman’s loud laughter were a dream.

“‘Be united in the future’?! There’s no way I’d ever allow that, you fool! Too bad, such a shame. Sister, Sister, are you watching this? Hmmm? How does it feel? It serves you right. It serves you right, it serves you right!! Now it’s all mine! Take *that*!!”

If this were a dream...

Clunk. With a sound like a stone, the woman’s right hand hits the ground. The laughter dies.

A hush falls over everything.

“Eeep! Y-you actually cut it... You’re scary...”

“Never mind, just hurry up and seal that thing. It’s not even bleeding! Hey, you! You’d better not be dead! Sahra, heal that woman!”

“Huh? Wha—? Which do I do first, heal her or seal this? Please don’t say do everything at once...”

“Aileen! Hey, snap out of it.”

Arms scoop her up. When her misting eyes manage to make out their owner’s face, she thinks, *Oh, I may actually be dead.*

On the other hand, she refuses to give them the satisfaction.

“T-to think the last face I saw would be yours, Prince Cedric... I wish I’d died earlier!”

“Could you get any ruder, woman?!”

“Don’t you dare die on me! You’re going to restore Count Gilbert’s estate for me, and you’re going to make the Ashtart affair look like a misunderstanding!”

“Bring the crown princess here! Lady Sahra, you seal that hand.”

“All right.” Sahra nods. Pale-faced, she picks up the hand; it really isn’t bleeding. Something in its palm is shining with all the colors of the rainbow.

Sahra embraces it, murmuring the words of a prayer. *I heard that in the game*, she thinks hazily. The Daughter of God’s spell, which can seal even the fiend dragon.

“That...right hand...”

“It’s the source of that woman’s abnormal power. It’s likely that she used it to produce the holy swords as well.”

She doesn’t recognize that voice, or those spectacles. She blinks. “...Who are you?”

“*Et tu*, Crown Princess?!”

“Stop that, Lester. She’s never met you.”

Marcus steps out from behind him. Taking Aileen’s arms without permission, he pulls her over his shoulder.

As one would expect, that wakes her up. “What are you doing?! Put me down! I am the crown princess! I’ll have you punished for your insolence!”

“No, injured people should— Ow, ow-ow-ow, don’t kick me. No punching or choking, either! Would you just settle down?! I swear, you’ve always been—!”

“Take him up on it, Lady Aileen. You’ve been working very hard this time.”

The last one to appear is Lilia. She’s beaming. Apparently she’s enjoying herself.

“Don’t tell me you’ve done something again—”

“Gracious, no, it wasn’t me this time. I’m startled, too.”

“...Daughter of God. Saint of Salvation. What is the meaning of this?” The woman is hovering in midair, and she isn’t bothering to hide the fact that her right hand is gone. Her feverish excitement has subsided, and her tone is devoid of emotion again. The fact that not a drop of blood is falling from her right wrist doesn’t seem to be surprising. “Do you intend to betray me?”

“Oh, come now, you didn’t think of us as allies in the first place.”

“...You can’t have done all of this in order to steal my right hand from me, can you?”

“Well, I mean, we wanted to make you use all the holy swords, and also make it so you could never use them again, and the time people are most likely to get careless is when they’ve accomplished

what they set out to do. Or so he said.” Serena jerks her chin at Isaac, who scowls. Serena snorts. “And so here we are, risking our lives! I’d definitely break up with a guy like that...”

“Miss Grace Dark. Or should I call you Her Majesty, the next queen of Hausel?” Cedric raises his voice. It’s the voice of a prince. “You will take responsibility for the many outrages you’ve inflicted on my brother, the crown prince.”

“Your brother? ...You mean the demon king? Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” The woman laughs again. Her right wrist is still completely bloodless. “How droll. Even though the demon king will destroy the world if left alone... I have the sacred sword. No one else has any way to stop him. Besides, even without that right hand, I can summon holy swords.”

A hole opens in the sky again. Seeing holy swords beyond it, Aileen catches her breath. “Lady Lilia! Your sacred sword—”

“Huh? No way.”

“I hadn’t even said it yet! We’re going to die!”

“I decided to form a league of heroines this time! Being left out is lonely. Besides, that woman makes no sense, and she ate the sacred sword; that’s just creepy. I need to wait for the right moment to use it. After all, I’m the player. It’s my responsibility to make it possible for the characters to win—”

Claude has risen to his feet. He strikes down the holy swords with magic, lashing his tail in a rage. That alone is enough to make the earth shake. Everyone claps their hands over their heads and drops to the ground.

Stop Master Claude and deal with that woman at the same time?! No matter how you look at it, that’s...!

Before she catches her balance, the holy swords appear again, aimed at her. The woman gives a little smile. “I compliment you on making me use up so many of the holy swords, at least. However, I still have the sacred sword and other trump cards.”

“...Seriously, who are you?”

“There’s no need for me to answer that. Carry that honor with you and die.”

“Yeah, well, trump cards are something you should hang on to.” Isaac levels his gun.

The woman’s gaze shifts to him. “...You as well? You can’t possibly think that will work on me.”

“Yeah, I probably couldn’t even graze you. I’m the type who fights by thinking up tricks anyway. Such as how to use that sacred stone you gave me, the one that’s good for a single teleportation spell, for example.”

Tsking, the woman flings a single holy sword at him. It pierces the spire beside Isaac, and the structure breaks, beginning to collapse.

“Isaac!!”

But he doesn't even try to dodge the enormous spire that's toppling toward him. He looks at Aileen for a brief moment, then pulls the trigger. There's a dry *bang*, Isaac's figure is crushed by the tower, and a shining gold magic circle appears.

It isn't just a teleportation spell. It's been reinforced by Serena, and it summons anyone the caster wishes, no matter how they're being restrained.

The one who emerges from it is...

“We're glad you held out, friends!”

Baal stands tall in midair, although a chair has materialized along with him, for some reason.

Oh...

It's the one person who can seal Claude while he's alive.

It can't be... Was this why...?

Lester is issuing orders, directed at the spot where Isaac vanished. Aileen understands they're going to go rescue him. He has to be alive.

She believes that with all her heart, but even so, her face is awful right now. The man gives her an exasperating smile. “What's that expression for? Over a minor thing like the theft of the sacred sword?”

“Master Baal...”

“Well, we suppose there's no help for it. Not with your husband in this state... Come, Demon King. It's the continuation of our usual feud.”



Having blocked every attack Claude unleashes, Baal slowly turns around.

“Return to your senses, unless you want to leave your wife and be banished to the demon realm.”

◆ Intermission ◆

The Final Boss's Romance Flag

A human has fallen into the demon realm. A human with sacred power, at that.

When he hears the report, Luciel smiles thinly. If such a prime specimen has fallen down here, a serious hole must have opened in the barrier between the demon realm and the so-called human realm, where humans reside.

As determined by the creator, the door between the two realms opens only from the human side. He has no idea who's done it this time, but he owes them one.

Now I can toy with the humans in earnest.

Humans are the favorite dolls of the detested creator, who demoted him to the god of the demon realm and these ugly demons. Toying with them and killing them all over the place is what dispels the gloom of these tiresome days.

“Sire, the fallen human is apparently skilled in combat. Several have already been killed.”

The winged, horned humanoid demon—he's fairly sure this one's name is Beelzebuth—brings this up as they fly through the sky together. He can't mean it as a warning, can he?

“Silence, lowly demon. Don't presume to advise a god.”

That's all it takes to shut the demon up. Even so, he keeps following him. This irritates Luciel, too.

The demons are devoted to him. The creator made them that way—in order to teach Luciel about love, or something like that. Why doesn't the god understand it's had the opposite effect?

Well, never mind. If I torture that human to death, I'll feel a little better.

The human has fallen into a forest of great trees that stretch upward, as if trying to reach the humans' world. Sunlight lances into the demon realm here, and the demons say it's as beautiful as the human realm. In the midst of the parched earth and swamps, the dead trees and dust clouds of their realm, it's the one place that hasn't lost its beauty. As the demon king, Luciel's heart is what makes all of these places, but even he doesn't know why they've turned out that way.

However, he likes the sensation of soft earth under his feet, and

the way little flowers bloom among the greenery. He doesn't want to defile it.

"If I kill the human, I'll do it somewhere else."

Soiling this place with filthy human blood would be unforgivable.

The moment he lands, his nostrils pick up a smell they've never encountered before.

Then smoke drifts his way, and his ears catch the crackle and snap of flames.

"....."

"Sire, what is this scent...?"

Beelzebuth looks around uneasily. Luciel is perplexed, but he follows the smoke.

After they've walked through the shade for a while, the wind shifts the smoke away, and the human—who's tending a campfire in the dappled light under the trees—turns around.

Beautiful straight black hair. The wide eyes that focus on Luciel are violet, proof that their owner has sacred power.

"—Are you human?"

It's a dignified woman's voice. She wears a sword at her waist, and her practical clothes look easy to move in. Later on, he learns it's the uniform of knights.

Come to think of it, how many centuries has it been since he spoke with anyone besides the demons? Perhaps he stands there in silence because this thought occurs to him, or perhaps it's because the woman who's blinking in the dappled light strikes him as exceedingly beautiful. Then she straightens up. "Are these your lands, perhaps? Your pardon. I seem to have wandered in by mistake."

She's not right, but she's not exactly wrong. Luciel frowns. *Doesn't she know she's fallen into the demon realm?*

He has no idea what sort of situation caused her fall, but she's awfully dense. Understandably, he feels appalled.

"If you wouldn't mind, would you tell me where this is? Who are you?"

"This is the demon realm."

In his confusion, he gives her an honest answer. The woman's eyes go round, though, which improves his mood. *Go on, be frightened, beg for mercy.*

Then she'll clumsily expose the ugly way she lives, and satisfy this thirst of his a little.

"And I am the dem—"

"I see. No wonder the place was crawling with demons. That makes sense. Are you lost, too?"

Smacking her hands together in realization, she makes up a random story for him, and he loses his chance to introduce himself.

Nodding away, the woman turns her back. She looks defenseless.

However, he can't spot any vulnerabilities.

"In that case, let's look for a way back together. Before that, though, we'll fortify ourselves with a meal."

"No, I'm... A meal?"

"That's right. Oh, I guarantee it's safe. I've eaten these several times before on battlefields."

"Eaten...? E-eaten what?"

"It's done to a turn. Nice and fatty as well. You've come at a good time."

When he hears that, Luciel takes another look at the source of the smoke.

The demons adore him because the creator made them that way. He may pity them, but he's never loved them. He's never thought they were precious...or he's pretty sure he hasn't.

However, apparently he was wrong about that.

The sight of the boar demon she's roasted whole makes him turn pale—even though he didn't feel a thing when Beelzebuth told him several had been killed.

"It may be a demon, but a life is a life. Let's partake gratefully. Come, you eat, too— Oh! Hey—"

"Sire! Sire, stay with me!"

Luciel topples over; Beelzebuth catches him from behind, while the woman supports him from the front. *M-my demon... My precious demon, is going to get eaten, by a human woman...*

In that moment, for the first time since his birth, the demon king became conscious of love.



Cheers! The usual call went up and glasses clinked, but it's been several hours since then.

Isaac had seen this development coming, but it was basically a given anyway: By now, their "men only" drinking party has turned into a scene from hell.

"I toooold you, I dunno what I should dooooo. Even if I tell her I like her, Serena's just gonna act like it grosses her out. What should I doooo, Jaaaames?"

"How should I know?! Don't cling to me!"

"Just push her down already. Man up and make it a fait accompli, Auguste!"

“Walt, don’t let Auguste drink any more than that. I’m sorry, Luc, can we get some medicine to sober him up?”

“Just give him some water; he’ll be fine. More importantly, Elefas, you don’t get drunk, do you?”

“If I did, there’s no telling what sort of potion I’d be made to swallow.”

“That’s right. If the demon king’s subordinates get dead drunk and disgrace themselves, their pay is cut.”

The drinking party began as the laughable Good Job in Ashmael party. However, at that remark from Keith—who’s nonchalantly drinking liquor as if it were water—Walt, Kyle, and Elefas all straighten up. The demon king’s subordinates have it rough.

Parenthetically, the demon king’s other adviser is sitting next to him, and he’s also quite a mess. “Th-the king is—! The king is, truly, kind, and great, and magnificent... I...I don’t...I have no idea how to express these feelings!”

Beelzebuth is apparently a weepy drunk. He wipes his tears away with his arm, desperately appealing to Denis.

“At times like that, go for a statue!”

“A statue... Yes, I see. I’ll make a statue that glorifies the king...!”

“Naked is good! I think the demon king might strip if you were the one who asked him, Bel.”

“Ha-ha! Your uncle here would looove to sell celebrity pinups of the demon king.”

“...If the demon king stripped naked, would it make the flowers happy, too?”

The attendees who are wagering various things on the demon king’s nudity are also definitely drunk.

They’re relaxing waaay too much... Well, we did get those royal exam candidates to go home...

It sounds as if there’s a candidate or two left, but it’s safe to say they dealt with them before the Foundation Festival. Everyone’s probably relieved.

That’s Isaac’s analysis anyway, but he’s feeling a bit tipsy himself. He swirls his glass, making the ice clink. He’s not that great at holding his liquor, so he’s been careful, but he may have had a bit too much.

...Even though he can’t afford to become like the holy king and the demon king’s daddy, who are already on the floor.

“What did these guys come here to do anyway?”

“Master Luciel got dizzy and went down after one swallow of the toast. No doubt being Master Claude’s double wore him out, but still.”

Keith sits down beside Isaac, glass in hand.

They’ve reserved the whole room, and food, liquor, and punch are set out buffet-style along one wall, so they’re just taking any seats that

happen to be available when they want one.

“Not only did the holy king get here late, he was already sloshed. He went down after his first drink.”

“It sounds as though he came straight from a banquet of his own.”

He’d teleported in out of nowhere, said, “We’re not druunk,” then proved the remark to be drunken nonsense. He’s actually not sure that, tomorrow, the guy will even remember he came to the drinking party.

“Still, if the holy king is also here, Milord will sulk later on.”

“...What did you think about Demon King Senior’s story?”

Claude has a destined lover, the subject of an oath the demon king swore on himself. That lover isn’t Aileen. Claude isn’t trying to fulfill the oath, so the demon king’s true form is angry. Someday, it’s going to take over and turn Claude into a demon— In short, that’s what Luciel has told them.

He also said that, if the true form swallows Claude, Aileen’s sacred sword won’t be able to turn him back.

He’s curious about what this adviser thinks of the crisis that’s bearing down on his master.

“It probably isn’t a lie. If it were, the demons would say so. Or no, maybe they couldn’t deny what Master Luciel said? Still, I don’t think he’s lying.”

“That’s about as bad as it gets. It means there aren’t any practical steps we can take.”

“I imagine it’ll work out somehow, though. He has all of you.”

Coming from a man who sold off demons as a way to help the demon king, that takes on a significant meaning. He gives him a sidelong glance, and Keith looks down, smiling rather wryly. “After all, we’ve come this far. My master, who had no human happiness, has made it this far. There’s nothing for it but to trust him now.”

“...It’s not like the demon king had nothing, and you know it.” Yeah, he really might be drunk: He comes out with something sentimental that won’t solve anything. “He had you.”

“True. Just as Lady Aileen had you. Oh, that’s right: How are things with Rachel?”

“Huh?”

“You see, I should be settling down soon. I tell you, I envy all you young people and your talk of not being able to confess your loves.”

The sudden change of subject makes him frown. However, Keith isn’t the type who’d say a thing like that just to tease him.

Even now, the guy is watching him with his usual shrewd smile. It’s as if he’s testing something.

It’s less a theory than a flash of insight.

The demon king’s loyal adviser always puts his master first. He’ll

probably keep him in mind when he chooses a marriage partner, too. Who would his ideal woman be? Who wouldn't be angry—on the contrary, who would actually accept it gladly—if he prioritized the demon king over his family?

“.....”

“.....”

“What's this? We sense a pointless battle brewing...”

The holy king, who's been lying around on the floor, abruptly sits up. Isaac feels weirdly relieved, and Keith rises, a model attendant. “Master Baal, I'll bring you some water.”

“Nn... Please do. Where are we? Where's Roxane...?”

“Not here. Are you talking in your sleep or something? Seriously, what did you teleport over here for?” He isn't an adviser, so he doesn't need to be considerate of the holy king, and he gets rude with no hesitation.

The holy king blinks, then grimaces. Apparently his head hurts. “Ah, we... Yes, we remember now. We had something to discuss with you.”

“Huhn? With me?”

“Right. You're Aileen's counselor, aren't you?” The holy king exhales languidly, resettling himself on the floor, and looks at Isaac. Isaac's still in his chair, which means the guy has to look up, but that's a king for you: It doesn't damage his dignity. “Have you heard anything about the demon king's situation?”

“Something about a destined lover and that he's close to turning into a demon. Not that the demon king's said anything about it.”

“We will vouch for it, then. We heard it from the demon king himself. No doubt he knows who that destined lover is, too.”

In that case...it wouldn't be strange if Claude had met her already, while he was running away from the royal exam candidates. If he had, then something may have been set in motion.

Something like fate, for example.

“In the first place, his magic was unstable because his true form in the demon realm was interfering. My earring is keeping it under control at the moment, but this oath goes beyond either magic or holy power. It's an intense resolution. A curse. If he meets his destined lover, that earring may stop working.”

Heartlessly, the holy king lays out the worst possible future. “There's still time. Come up with a plan. No doubt we'll cooperate with it.”

“...Why me? Take this to Aileen—”

“It would be hard on Aileen. We are capable of sealing him into the demon realm while he's still alive.”

Even if he can't save him.

Is it friendship, or mercy? Isaac narrows his eyes. As the holy king gets to his feet, he totters slightly. He must still be a little drunk.

Personally, Isaac is drunk enough to hope that's the case.

Luciel has been stealthily listening in. He's lying on his side in a corner of the room. Quietly, he opens his eyes.

He feels as if he's been dreaming of a distant, fondly remembered time when he was still happy. Reality isn't too bad, either, though.

This is the thing about humans.

They're trying to find a way to protect his son. His wife would be glad.

Even he's happy. He is, and yet the true form's anger refuses to subside.

"I get it. I can't give up on my dream yet, either."

One more time, let me see her face, or even just call her name.

What's your name?

But the end of the dream where he asks that question is always red with blood.

Afterword

Hello, this is Sarasa Nagase.

Thank you for picking up my humble excuse for a novel. The story of Aileen, the demon king, and their merry friends has reached Volume 5. Not only that, but this volume and the next form a novel in two parts, and as you've seen, this one has a "To be continued!" sort of ending. Even here in the afterword, I'm extremely nervous.

Volume 6, the second half of the story, is already scheduled for publication, so rest assured that it'll be coming soon and enjoy the story.

The second volume of the manga also comes out on June 25th. Anko Yuzu shows Aileen and the other characters in really wonderful ways, and I recommend it from the bottom of my heart. Please feel free to enjoy them together.

In terms of the online version, this book is the first half of the fifth section. I've made some fine corrections and additions, and the intermission is entirely new.

At this point in time, the contents of Volume 5 should still be available in the online version as well. Sometimes the printed books will be ahead, while at other times, the online edition overtakes and passes them partway through. It's irregular, so I'd keep an eye on the online version as well.

I've had ten volumes published since my debut, but this is actually the first one I've written where the story breaks in the middle. It's something I've always wanted to do, and since the next volume was already scheduled, I went for it. However, I learned that in addition to being an awful lot of pressure, it's frankly quite hard to do.

I read every work I could find that ended this way, analyzing them to see how their authors created their hooks and what their intentions were, and it was still difficult... It made me painfully aware of how much I still have to learn, and how inexperienced I am as an author.

I'd like to devote myself to improving.

And now for the thank-yous.

Mai Murasaki, who draws absolutely beautiful illustrations for every volume. Thank you very much for the slight changes to Aileen, now that she's married! No matter what delightful final boss I send along, I know Murasaki will make him gorgeous, so it's always fine! I can always count on beautiful artwork. Thank you in advance for your help on Volume 6.

Anko Yuzu, who draws the indescribably marvelous manga version of this story for *Monthly Comp Ace*. Thank you so much for truly treasuring Aileen and the others. Please continue to take good care of them.

My supervising editor. I was the one who declared I'd write a two-part novel, and yet when I was working on it, I got terribly nervous. Thank you for encouraging me. The schedule and everything else are in your hands.

In addition, the proofreaders, the members of the *Kadokawa Beans Bunko* and *Comp Ace* editorial departments, the designers and marketing personnel, everyone at the printer, and all the people who were involved in the making of this book: Every one of you has my deepest gratitude.

When it felt as if I might get discouraged, the warm words people sent me in letters and on Twitter sustained me in real time. Your kindness has saved me over and over. Thank you very much.

Finally, to everyone who picked up this book: It was your support that enabled me to tackle this two-part project. Really, thank you so much. I still have a lot to learn, but I'll do my very best, so please continue to cheer Aileen and the others on.

Now then, let's meet again in Volume 6.

Sarasa Nagase

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